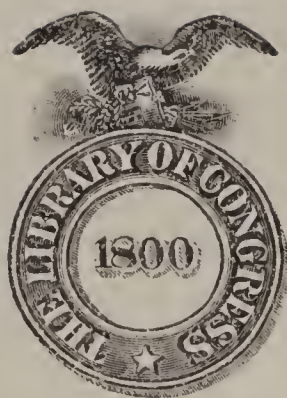


THE GREEN EYED ONE



H. RONEY WEIR



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THE GREEN EYED ONE

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BY
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Author of "Merry Andrew," etc.



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THE GREEN EYED ONE

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I

It was fifteen minutes after seven of a clear, cool, April morning in Redmoon. The town was not yet astir save for the grocer's boy putting out the display of early vegetables down street, and the sound of unseen motors splutteringly protesting, like lazy beasts of burden, against being made ready for the day's work.

Susan Dunlap paused a moment before the gay windows of her millinery store for a last survey before entering. It was opening day. Before ten o'clock half the women of Redmoon would have visited the store to handle, to admire, to decry or to purchase the confections now posed so freshly against the velvet backgrounds in the store windows.

Susan gazed at the display through a haze of happiness, a happiness not unmingled with contrition, for she was aware that the success of the event was due more to the industry of Gusta Klatz, her trimmer, than to her own.

At the remembrance of the last three triumphant weeks she drew a quick breath, catching her

full under lip with her teeth as she stooped to unlock her door. Up the street she imagined she saw two customers looming into view and she wished for a few moments to herself before the turmoil of the day began.

Safely inside the curtained doors she took off her small brown hat, her gloves, her natty brown coat and stood a moment before the full length mirror to gaze at the most successful person in Redmoon. She had never believed herself to be the least bit good-looking—pretty was not a word to apply to so large a girl—but she must be—something, or the most desired young man in the town would not have chosen her from amongst all Redmoon girls.

She raised a shapely hand and turned a small diamond back and forth to catch the light, as she had done last night at home before her own mirror. The light in the draped store was dim and the diamond refused its more brilliant scintillations, but the girls would be sure to see it soon enough. Gusta Klatz would cry out at sight of it and understand at once its presence on Susan's finger; her cousin, Helen Pickens, who worked in the store, would look blankly at it and allow all her jealous envy to appear through her thick-lensed glasses. Helen's father was well-to-do, with a big farm up at the west end of town. Helen had always had whatever she wanted ex-

cept—Jeff Plummer. There was not a girl in town who would not have gladly worn the ring which Susan twisted so proudly upon her finger.

She patted her heavy black hair into order, straightened her brown satin frock with its transparent garniture of chiffon about the waist and shoulders. Her cousin, Colinette Gard, had chosen this dress for her and sent it out from New York to wear at the opening. Colinette had known better than she could have known herself how the golden brown tints would bring out the russet splendors of Susan's beauty.

"I am, honestly, a lovely thing!" decided Susan, and rightly, for a new dress and a new lover will make a beauty of the plainest woman.

On former opening days Susan had focused her attention on the stock, the appearance of the salesroom, the state of readiness of the two back workrooms, but today she was happily careless of all these. Gusta would see to them; her interest was centered upon herself; her personal appearance, her tumultuous memories of last night. For it was only last night that Jeff had given her the ring.

The air of the store was heavy with the scent of varnished straw, artificial blooms, newly unrolled velvets and laces. They overpowered the faint odor of the pussy-willows which Gusta Klatz had gathered and brought in from the west

road the Sunday before. Gusta had promised to bring a bouquet of geraniums with her when she came this morning, a bouquet accumulated from the windows of West Brown Street. Sue's mother would furnish a few treasured white ones, and Gram'ma Gard sole salmon-colored heads and Lady Washingtons. The red blossoms would be of Gusta's own growing.

She came presently, all in a nervous flutter of responsibility. Gusta, too, had heavy black hair which she wore rolled back over a narrow gold band which showed only upon the top of her head. It was much fluffed out at the sides because hats looked well over hair arranged in this manner. Her black net dress was perhaps, over-ornamented, yet tasty; she wore a heavy gold chain, garnet ear-drops, and many rings, for, as her brother Willie had described Gusta once long ago, "she loved things that went on."

"My, but you look swell!" she cried out at sight of Susan. "My, but isn't that a pretty dress! Colinette knows what becomes you all right. Have any of the girls come yet? I see the smoke-colored toque has tipped a little there in the window. I'll bet you anything we'll sell that to Lizzie Smith. She likes dull things."

"Not drab enough for her," responded Sue, reaching up to one of the green boxes on a shelf

behind the counter with her beringed hand. But Gusta did not notice, so intent was she on making the last hat ready for the coming storm of custom.

Helen Pickens, in a mouse-hued silk, which accentuated her lack of color, came late. She was the first to notice Susan's ring. Her eyes, as Susan had expected them to, glared with a frozen envy.

"My!" she mocked, "where did you get all the jewelry?"

"It's Jeff's," laughed Sue. "We're engaged."

Helen's lips stiffened into a white line, and her murmured congratulations were lost in the noise of the arriving "tryers-on" up in front.

Gusta reveled in millinery. She could not conceive of a greater triumph than was hers at that moment, for she had designed and executed the mulberry creation which the grocer's wife was buying at a good round price.

At five o'clock Helen Pickens pleaded a headache and went home. On the way she saw "Gram'ma Gard" standing on her little stoop bidding "good-by" to two church ladies who announced their intention of attending the millinery opening on their way home.

"I ain't going to have anything new this spring," one of them was saying, "but I'll take

my last year's hat in and see what Susan can do with it. I always leave everything to Sue and she fits me out all right."

"Susan Dunlap is a first class milliner," witnessed the other woman, "besides being reasonable in her prices and pleasant to deal with."

The first speaker corroborated this statement, adding that, besides all this, she had "heaps of style."

Mrs. Gard glowed with pleasure at the appreciation accorded Susan. She had been singing the praises of her son's daughter, Colinette Gard, during the afternoon, a subject of conversation not particularly interesting to her guests, because the young person in question no longer lived in Redmoon. Both ladies remembered well enough, however, that Colinette had been a strangely dominating presence, not alone in the immediate circle of her relatives, but in church, school, and, in fact, the entire town, and had gone away in a blaze of glory, as one might say, to study art in New York; had gone, and had stayed gone for four long years; years so full of excitement and sorrow that the young woman's memory had become somewhat dim except as her doting grandmother recalled it with letters, photographs, and sketchy examples of the young artist's work. For the four years following Colinette's going were the years of the great War.

Helen Pickens, although not at heart a cruel girl, felt a savage joy in the fact that the news she was bringing to Gram'ma Gard would not be welcome news. Uncle Luther Dunlap, Susan's stepfather, would be pleased enough at Sue's engagement to Marcus Plummer's son. And of course if Uncle Luther was pleased Aunt Susan Dunlap would be. For wasn't it the part of a wife always to be pleased with whatever pleased her husband?

The look of dismay which spread over Mrs. Gard's face when Helen delivered her tidings amply repaid that young person for bringing them.

"Yes," she finished, "she wore his ring in the store today. I noticed it before Gusta did. I think Gusta is blue over it."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Gard in a hushed voice.

"She may lose her job when Sue marries. For of course Sue will sell out the store and a new milliner may not want a Redmoon girl for head trimmer. I know I shouldn't if I owned the store. I'd send to Chicago for a real trimmer. You are all dressed up, Gram'ma Gard; were you going out?"

"Your Aunt Susan and I thought we would go down to the opening a little while. I was just goin' to step across to see if she is ready."

Helen resumed her journey home to bear the

news to her own mother, while Mrs. Gard put on her things and "stepped across" to her daughter's house.

Mrs. Dunlap was not ready. She seldom was ready at the time appointed. There was always some unexpected task to delay her. Today it was bread which refused to bake because of lack of proper fuel for the kitchen stove.

Mrs. Gard was glad to find Susan alone in the house. Nowadays one was so apt to discover Susan's husband, Luther Dunlap, ensconced in the rocking-chair by the kitchen stove, or snoring on the sitting-room lounge. Dunlap belonged to the great army of men who retire from activity at the first touch of the hand of time. Since his stepdaughter, Susan, had made such a marked success at the millinery business and was therefore able to "help some" with the household expenses he had been especially dilatory in hunting for work. The "some" of Susan's helping amounted to such generous proportions that both Luther and his son, Elmer, made but negligible contributions to the budget.

Mrs. Gard heard the thud, thud of an unskilful axe at the back door. Mrs. Dunlap, in her best dress, was splitting up a block of wood to hasten the baking fire.

"Does seem, Susan," protested Mrs. Gard mildly, "as if Luther or Elmer could manage to

keep a little wood split up ahead so you wouldn't allers have to do it."

"Yes, does seem so," responded Susan Dunlap in the lifeless tone which had become habitual with her. "Rob used to keep me pretty well sawed and split up ahead, but since he went away—dear me!—you know how Luther and Elmer are. They don't mean to be lazy; it's just thoughtlessness. Actually, Sue cuts most of the wood nights after she gits home from the store. She actually does."

"Well, by what I hear, Luther'll have to split his own wood after this, or hustle Elmer a little bit."

"Why, what do you mean?" demanded her daughter, pausing in her work and turning a thin face up to her mother.

"Helen just stopped in to my place to tell me that Susan's goin' to be married."

A blueness crept around Mrs. Dunlap's lips. She stood up and put a hand to her side in a feeble, inadequate way which went to her mother's heart. Mrs. Gard stepped down and gathered the armful of wood which Susan had so painfully made ready.

"No, ma, you'll spoil your dress; let it alone. I'll carry it in."

But Mrs. Gard went sturdily up the steps with her load, took off the stove lid and thrust in two

sticks. Mrs. Dunlap followed and sank into a chair like one who had received a blow.

"I was afraid of it," she said at last. "He's been hangin' around here a good deal lately. Luther'll be all set up over it, I s'pose. He'll think it's a great honor to be married into the Plummer family. Seems awful queer that Susan should tell her Cousin Helen before she told her own ma."

Mrs. Gard stooped to peep into the oven. "It appears that Susan is wearing a new diamond ring in the store today. Couldn't resist the temptation of flashin' it at the opening. That's how Helen found it out."

"It's awful hard for a mother when her daughter marries," sighed Mrs. Dunlap.

"Nobody knows that better'n I do," agreed Mrs. Gard and looked at her daughter compassionately. Susan Dunlap bore many signs of defeat in her life-long battle with hard work. "Even if the daughter gits the best kind of a man goin'. And good men are as scurse as hen's teeth nowadays," finished Mrs. Gard.

"Well, girls will marry if they have a chance," sighed Mrs. Dunlap in extenuation of her daughter's step, "and their chances are slimmer now even than before the War."

"I s'pose they be," agreed Mrs. Gard sorrowfully. "Have you heard when Rob'll be home?"

“No, but it won’t be long now. He’s mad to think of all that trainin’ and then never to git across. And look what luck Willie Klatz has had—seen the ocean, and France, and the War, and never got wounded but once and then not bad, and got all sorts of medals for bravery and so on, besides being Lieutenant Klatz now.”

“Well, Rob shouldn’t be mad because he didn’t git to go across, he was ready to go if he had been needed, and that’s more’n Jeff Plummer can say.”

Susan Dunlap took out the bread. Her face showed deep displeasure at her mother’s words.

“I’d hate to think the man who is goin’ to be Susan’s husband is a coward,” she said.

“Oh well, I don’t s’pose he is,” soothed Mrs. Gard, repenting of her injudicious speech.

“There was a good deal said at the time of the draft,” persisted Susan, as if to force her mother into a fuller expression of confidence in young Plummer.

“I know there was. But young Doc. Snyder said Jeff Plummer wasn’t fit to go.”

“But old Doc. Merton said that was all moonshine and that Jeff Plummer was as fit to go as any boy in Redmoon. He said it was Marcus’s money that got the clearance for Jeff, but of course, nobody knows. I do hope if Susan marries Jeff Plummer we shall all like him.”

"I hope so," said Mrs. Gard with a great show of cheerfulness.

Susan got on her hat and coat and the two women started for town. As they passed the Plummer residence the thought in the minds of both women was that it had a down-at-heel appearance; that it needed paint.

"Waldo Pickens says that Marcus Plummer ain't been doin' very well in his business since the War," said Mrs. Dunlap timidly.

"Yes, Waldo says he can't git help to carry on the business since the War started."

"Seems to me him and Jeff ought to be able to manage a business in a small town like this—"

Mrs. Gard made no reply. They both knew that Jeff Plummer, pampered only son of a near-wealthy man, had not been trained to take labor seriously. Suddenly Mrs. Dunlap gave way:

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" she whimpered, "I'm afraid Susan's in for a hard time all her life, and she don't deserve it! It's a shame. She don't deserve it! She's just the best child a mother ever had! She's been abused all her life by Luther Dunlap and his boys, and now she's goin' to be abused by the Plummers—"

"Hush up!" hissed her mother, "Here comes Mis' Plummer now! She's got a bandbox. She's been after her hat. Wipe your glasses, Susan, for pity's sake! You might as well brace

up an' bear what you have to bear, you poor girl. You've certainly had enough trouble, goodness knows!"

Mrs. Plummer passed the two with a cool little nod. She was a sour-faced, important little person who, in all probability, did not know as yet of the matrimonial bond forming between her family and that of her neighbor's, and would not have approved if she had.

"I never could abide that woman!" whispered Susan fiercely, "Little black, stuck-up thing. My! She'll be Susan's mother-in-law!"

They found young Susan in a triumphant disorder. She and Gusta were alone in the store, which bore evidence to the storm which had raged all day.

"You should have seen us!" exclaimed Gusta Klatz. "I guess everybody in town has been in here today."

"Not everybody," laughed Susan, "but the rest of them will get around this evening. You run up to supper now, Gusta so as to give me a chance before the evening crowd comes in. What's the matter, ma? Have you a headache?"

Her mother denied the headache, and shrank in expectancy of Susan's announcement. But Susan did not see fit to tell her news just then. She was disappointed that her mother and grandmother should have chosen so late an hour for

their inspection of the opening. All day she had hoped that her lover would manage to pass the store at the supper hour when he knew that she would be alone. While her mother and grandmother threaded their admiring course through the jungle of trimmed hats, trailing gauzes and exotic blooms, she went frequently to the front door to snap out a perfectly clean dustcloth. On the last of these trips she distinctly saw Jeff Plummer down on the corner beyond the post-office in earnest conversation with his old sweetheart, Lila Merton.

A surge of almost unendurable jealousy swept over Susan; jealousy which had grown and faded and come to life again during the month just past, and which she in her ignorance supposed would be done for forever when she and Jeff were really engaged.

II

It was a number of days later before Jeff Plummer stopped at the door of the milliner store for a word with Susan.

"Heard you had a swell turnout at the opening," he remarked.

"Yes. Why didn't you come in and see the store all fixed up? I sort of expected you."

"Oh, I'm a better judge of milliners than of millinery," he joked. "I'm afraid of women."

"You didn't seem to be afraid of one down on the street-corner that day of the opening."

"Oh, did you see us talking down there? That was Lila. I hadn't seen her before for a coon's age. She's lookin' thin—don't you think so?"

"I don't know; I haven't seen her in a coon's age either. She keeps strictly away from me."

Jeff laughed. "I supposed she was up to the hat fight."

"No, she never came near."

Jeff laughed again. "You women are the limit! Why don't you live and let live?"

An inarticulate rage choked Susan. She was aware instinctively that it would be better to keep still—not to let Jeff see how he could hurt her, but diplomacy was not Susan's strong point.

"I don't like your standing long hours on the street-corner talking to a girl you used to go with! I don't like it!" she stormed. They were at the shop door and Susan stooped to lock it. Jeff took the key from her in a masterful way and locked the door himself. Then he swung Susan about and tucked his hand under her elbow roughly.

"Come on, now, Skookums, don't be a jealous old grouch. You can't expect to keep a fellah shut up in your handbag with your handkerchief and your keys. See? Even if you are wearin' his ring. The girls will meet a fellah on the street now and then, even after he is married. See? You'll have to get used to that. I'm no sissy. You knew that before you agreed to hitch up with me, so let's change the subject, eh?" He threw an arm about her and crushed her to him without regard to her finery.

"Oh, Jeff!" she protested, and he laughed recklessly.

"I hear you was a swell dame at your hat fair; swung all kinds of style, eh?—you and the girls. I'm told you just everlastingly swept all the Red-moon women off their feet; pinched the dollars out of 'em as fast as they could line up to the counter. Is that straight?"

"We had a big day," acknowledged Susan with justifiable pride.

"You bet, that's the way to catch 'em, when

they ain't lookin'. How much did you take in?"

"In cash, about a hundred and fifty dollars, but of course we took lots of orders which have gone out since. I shall be awfully busy from now on until the first of July."

"Too busy for me to be hanging around; that what you mean?"

"You know better, Jeff. I'm never too busy to see you, but I want to make all the money I can this summer, seeing it's my last summer in business. It is to be my last summer, isn't it?"

"I shouldn't wonder; unless you want to keep right on. You like the business pretty well, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I've always liked the business."

"Well then, what's the matter with keeping right on with it?"

"I can't keep house and millinery store too."

"We'll board; it's cheaper than keeping up a place anyhow. We'll board with mother and father. How does that suit you?"

"Anything that suits you, Jeff, suits me."

"That will leave us both a good deal freer. Our house has always been too big for our family."

"But—Jeff, I don't believe your mother likes me well enough for that—to have me always in the same house with her."

"What makes you think my mother doesn't like you?"

"Well, she has lived neighbor to our folks all her life but has never neighbored with us."

"She may like you and not the rest of your folks. I'll tell the world I don't care much about Luther Dunlap myself."

Susan had, at times, experienced the same feeling toward her stepfather, but she did not relish the bald statement on the lips of her lover.

"You seem to like Luther Dunlap's son awfully well; you two are together half the time nowadays."

Jeff laughed again. "Elmer's trying to get on to our team. Elmer wants to play ball. I don't believe he ever will, though. He's an awful mutt—is Elmer. Always gittin' into trouble in strange towns. That won't do, you know. You can hit a pace in your own town, but when you take to roamin' in a neighboring village you've kindah got to stick to the Sunday School stuff. See?"

"Jeff, is it true that Elmer got drunk over at the Ridge last week?"

"Well, Elmer was considerably lit up."

"Jeff, I don't like that. It makes lots of trouble for our folks. Elmer is going pretty fast for a young boy. He's just a kid."

"You should worry. You'll be shut of the whole crowd before fall."

"I shall never be shut of my mother nor my grandmother, never."

"You think so now, but you'll be surprised how soon you'll get away from 'em after you're married. That's the way with young folks always. When they strike out for themselves they soon learn to stand alone. It has to be that way. Suppose one generation hung on to the generation behind and that to the next—why, my lord, where would they be? Nowhere. And the old folks don't expect it. They expect the young ones to stand on their own pins. Say, Lila was telling me yesterday that Gertie Calkins and young Doc. Snyder are going to pull off a match."

"You don't mean it!" Susan was delighted. Nothing interested her so much nowadays as engagements. She heartily disliked Gertie Calkins but the fact that Gertie, as well as herself, was engaged to be married, established a bond between herself and her old enemy of high school days. How Gertie had queened it over her until her cousin, Colinette, had appeared and broken Gertie Calkins' ring of power for good! How Gertie and her minions, Lizzie Smith, the dress-maker's daughter, and Lila Merton, the doctor's daughter, and the others had been taught to crawl to Coli-

nette's little feet; and how Colinette had dragged all of her relatives up to her own level of importance! It had been wonderful—that elevation of the Dunlaps and Gards and Klatzes and the rest of the dwellers in that undesirable region known as “above the railroad.”

She had not seen Colinette for four years, those four years of War and uncertainty. Grandmother Gard received a letter weekly. At first those letters had been mailed in New York; later they came from overseas and were read six weeks or so after they had been written. Now the War was over; the soldiers straggling home, in companies, in groups—one at a time. The Bray boys were home, and the Johnsons—what were left of them—but Willie Klatz was still on the other side. Colinette was again in New York picking up the tangled threads of her work—

“S'matter, Skookums? What you poutin' about?” demanded Jeff.

“I'm not pouting; I was thinking.”

“About what?”

But Susan would not tell him. They had reached the Dunlap door and Jeff accepted Susan's invitation to come in. He knew that his dislike for Luther Dunlap was not reciprocal. Dunlap always flattered and cringed when in the presence of a Plummer. Susan's marriage

would not add to the material prosperity of the Dunlap household; it would rather detract, but think of the honor of being matrimonially allied with the Plummers! Luther had only been aware of the engagement of his wife's daughter to Jeff Plummer a short time, but he had already broken the tidings to his sister's husband, Waldo Pickens.

"Goin' to have a weddin' at our house pretty soon, I s'pose," he announced nonchalantly, noting with pleasure Waldo's pained expression.

"So Helen's tellin' us," replied Pickens shortly. Waldo and his wife had imagined at one time that Jeff Plummer was making up to their Helen.

Luther greeted his future stepson-in-law with great warmth: "Well, how's the Plummers? Take a chair. How's the Redmoon nine goin' to account for fallin' down at the game last Saturday? Come now, make a clean breast of the matter."

Elmer was not a whit behind his father in the cordiality of his welcome. Susan herself was no deeper in love with young Plummer than was her stepbrother.

The three launched into a fervid discussion of the game which lasted the better part of an hour. In the safety of the kitchen Susan's mother murmured, "I should think that Elmer and your pa

would know better than to buckle Jeff right down to baseball. They ought to remember what he comes here for."

"You look tired to death, ma," mourned Susan with a guilty remembrance of her lover's prediction that the time drew near when she would forget this poor, overworked mother with the rest of the Dunlaps.

Was that true? Should she forget all the kindness and patience and tenderness lavished on her, more or less surreptitiously to be sure, but all the more touchingly, by this mild, tired woman?

Suddenly she went over and threw her arms about her mother's neck and began to sob noisily. Mrs. Dunlap, startled, warned her to "hush up!" and demanded to know "whatever was the matter?"

She was unable to tell very coherently, and her mother believed her emotion had been called forth by Jeff's holding interest of the discussion of the bad luck of the home team. She managed to break up the ball social and to give Susan a half hour alone with her lover behind the closed parlor door.

But it was not an especially happy hour, Jeff's mind being still upon the sorrows of the Redmoon nine, and Susan's in a state of flux betwixt love

and filial duty. Then Jeff discovered that Susan had been weeping and demanded to know the reason.

For the first, Susan was confronted by the question of perfect confidence between lovers. A more tactful person might have led Jeff's interest into different channels, but Susan drew long, sobbing breaths and remained dumb.

"Is your mother mad because I came home with you?" demanded Jeff.

"Oh my, no; mother likes you."

"Well, you were all right until you went out into the kitchen. Come now; you're so keen on my tellin' you everything I do and everything I say—won't let me speak to a friend on the street without gittin' sore about it—"

"Oh, Jeff, I never—"

"Yes you did too. And then you come in with your eyes and nose looking like cherries and won't tell why."

"Oh, Jeff, must I tell you why?"

"Do just as you darn please."

"Well—then—I was crying because I—feel sort of—bad about leaving my mother—"

"Well, if you feel as bad as all that comes to, we'll call the deal off."

"Oh, Jeff, how quick you take up things! I don't believe you care for me at all."

“Don’t you think so? Wha’ d’ yeh s’pose I’m hanging round this joint for? Do you think I’m courting your mother or the old man?”

“No. I suppose I am awful trying, Jeff.” She gazed yearningly at him hoping for a denial, but Jeff, nursing his own wrongs, decided to discipline her a bit.

“You ain’t what you might call handsome, with your nose red like this.”

Susan gazed over his shoulder into a possible future of many tears; into a future when her hair would be gray and thin like her mother’s; when her dark cheek would take on the yellowish pallor of middle age where no rose would bloom; when her teeth—

Well, there was no use in anticipating that dark day; she was still young and fresh and blooming—yes, it was still her day.

Jeff was at the parlor door which led out upon the narrow front porch. She longed for a perfect understanding before he went.

“We shall always love each other, sha’n’t we, dear?” she murmured.

“I’ll say we shall,” promised Jeff, but added in an undertone as they stood on the porch together, “You must get this good and plenty, though; I ain’t marryin’ any other member of your family except you.”

“Oh yes, Jeff, I understand.”

She received his good night embrace and afterwards stood to listen to the sound of his steps as he clattered over the loose boards of the walk in the direction of his own home. Even after he had turned the corner down by the stark old Pettingill House, she stood sorrowfully in the dark of the porch thinking over the great things of life. The girl's lover claimed her; his love must of a necessity drive out all the old loves, mother, grandmother, and—Cousin Colinette. Everyone. She wished that she might keep all her loves, but, of course, as Jeff had said, when a person—especially a girl—took on new ties, she had to make room for them by a slight or an altogether loosening of the old.

The question popped into her mind as to how far Jeff would disconnect himself from his own family when he married. He had been an only child, petted and indulged; his wish the law of the household. Would her love and care make up to him for that of his doting parents? And how much more painful must be the rending of home ties on his part than on hers, whose home, in her stepfather's house, subject to the whims of her stepfather's children, deprived of all the luxuries and many of the necessities of life, had been barren enough until she had become able to provide those luxuries and necessities for herself.

How perfectly wonderful it was that Marcus

Plummer's son should have chosen her, Susan Dunlap, from amongst all Redmoon girls!

"Mrs. Jeff Plummer!" she whispered, then laughed softly and actually blushed there alone in the dark at her own folly.

The sound of Jeff's steps ceased and still Susan lingered on the porch. Suddenly it seemed as if she were waiting for something to happen—something of moment. She heard her mother's slow movements about the living room setting things to rights before retiring; she heard Elmer's stumping progress upstairs to bed; she heard her stepfather grumbling out some complaint as he wound the clock. He always thought up things to find fault about while winding the clock. Then there were the sounds of approaching footsteps, clipping along in a springy, young-man fashion. Could it be Jeff coming back? There were no young men on Upper Brown Street to be coming home at this time in the evening.

The feet tripped on a loose board, their owner muttered something and came on again. It could not be Jeff; he was better acquainted with the loose boards in that walk.

The traveler crossed the street and a moment later a square of light bloomed under Mrs. Gard's porch, framing the figure of Mrs. Gard herself.

Susan could not hear what passed between her grandmother and the caller, but she did hear the quick clatter of his returning feet, accompanied by a piercing, tuneless whistle.

She stepped back into the house. Luther Dunlap was putting away the clock key.

"I'm going to run over to gram'ma's a minute," she told him.

"Is Jeff gone?"

"Yes, quite a while ago."

"Well then, you come along in an' git to bed so's't the house can quiet down an' a body git some kind of rest! Look at the time o' night; half-past ten!"

"Why, of course, Susan," called her mother from her bedroom back of the parlor, "your gram'ma's to bed a long time ago." Mrs. Dunlap always seconded her husband's motion. She found it easier that way, especially when said motion related in any way to young Susan.

"No, gram'ma isn't in bed. Someone came there to the door just now. I saw 'em. I'm going to step over and see who it was."

Dunlap said it was someone to ask the way, probably, but he withdrew his objection, and sat in his sock feet with suspenders dangling, to await the report.

He did not have long to wait. Susan returned

almost immediately. There was no elation in her voice as she announced her news.

"It was a telegram from Colinette," she said. "Colinette is coming home for the summer. She will be here the first of May."

III

THE disturbance of Colinette's coming began the very night that Mrs. Gard received the telegram. She went about in an excited frame of mind, taking inventory of household stores, sheets, pillows, tablecloths. Now and then her thoughtful expression gave way to one of satisfied content.

"It'll make a difference—her comin'," she murmured, "it allers does make a difference when she's round, either for better or for worse. Little Colinette! My own little Colinette! Back here in Redmoon after bein' away so long! Dear suz!" After Mrs. Gard had gone to bed and dropped into a disturbed slumber she would waken wondering what gave her that excited feeling. Then it would come back to her— "Oh yes, Colinette, coming back after four long years!"

Her granddaughter Susan's rest was disturbed also, and by the same cause. Susan had strange dreams; some of them unpleasant—prophetic. She awoke in the morning unrefreshed and nervous. She stretched her arm above her head, drew them down again and lay studying her hands; large, but smooth, with pink, well-manicured nails. The palms were pink also.

No callouses there now, in spite of occasional wood-chopping.

The callouses were doubly hard on her mother's hands, as she knew, but she couldn't help that, could she? Elmer and her stepfather were supposed to attend to all the coarse chores. They didn't, of course, and they never would, but they could no longer shirk them off upon her shoulders.

And who was it who had emancipated her from such slavery? Why, who but Cousin Colinette.

And yet—she was sorry that Colinette was coming home.

At breakfast the conversation was all of the telegram of the night before.

"How long she goin' to stay?" demanded Luther Dunlap, helping himself to the most shapely egg. He, too, disapproved of Colinette's visit.

"She won't stay long," soothed his wife. "They say she works pretty hard in New York."

"Rats!" said Elmer, "I'd like a job I didn't have to work at any harder than at that job of hers."

"Well, I s'pose you could a done her job if you'd gone to work an' learned it," said Luther. "'Tain't anything so wonderful, to make pictures that look kindah like somebody. I used to do it when I was a boy in school."

"It'll be a good thing for you, Susan," said her mother, "Colinette will know all about what you ought to get for your outfit, and how you ought to have it made."

"Yah!—Ha, ha! She'll know all about your fellah, too; so much that she'll have him tagging off after her if you don't watch out. Jeff is a great chap to make up to the newest girl in town."

Elmer had calculated the effect of his words to a nicety. Susan's face was red to bursting. Up went her hands, and she sprang from the table and ran into the parlor, slamming the door behind her. With a resentful glance at her stepson, Mrs. Dunlap followed her daughter. Susan was prone on the carpet-lounge indulging in a noisy storm of emotion.

"There, there, dear," soothed her mother, "don't carry on so! Elmer knows that he can send you off this way, or he wouldn't have said what he did."

"What Elmer said is the truth!" sobbed Susan. "Jeff is always staring after girls who are better looking than I am!"

"Well, Susan, you'll have to git used to that; all men are that way. They are even worse after they are married. You've just got to git used to it. You must remember, too, that Jeff left Lila

Merton to make up to you when you began to be successful in business and dress right up to scratch. You didn't seem to feel so bad about men's infidelity then when you was gittin' the upper hand. And right there is a fault that I guess all girls are guilty of—not that I'm blaming 'em altogether; they have a hard time gittin' settled but almost any of 'em will cut in on another girl's love affair if she happens to want the man. It's supposed to be two men who fight over one girl, but it ain't apt to be that way any more."

Susan made no reply, but she stopped sobbing and sat up.

"Now you run around the west side of the house into the kitchen by the back door, bathe your face an' eyes and then come in and finish your breakfast," advised her mother.

"I don't want any breakfast," replied Susan.

"But think what a hard day you're likely to have in the store; it's silly to go off to work without anything to eat."

"I couldn't eat a mouthful. I can bathe my face down there and I want to get there before Helen and Gusta do. I suppose I'll have to take this sort of talk all day from Helen and—well, whoever happens in."

"Gusta won't nag you."

"No, Gusta won't, but Helen Pickens will, and

Gertie Calkins if she happens to come in and has heard."

"And Lila Merton, I s'pose. But you couldn't altogether blame Lila Merton if she should, could you, Susan?"

"Lila Merton never steps her foot inside of my store," replied Susan coldly. "She and her mother went clear to Milltown to buy their hats, and good riddance go with them, say I! As for Jeff giving her up for me, there never was any real engagement between her and Jeff. He told me so himself. They just sort of grew' up together and Lila took him for granted. Of course Jeff's mother egged on the affair. She would rather Jeff married the doctor's daughter than a girl whose stepfather mends roofs and putties in windows. But Jeff liked me better and so he dropped Lila and began to go with me."

"Well, I don't think you need worry about Colinette. Colinette likes you too. She wouldn't demean herself to flirt with your steady fellow, don't you ever believe she would. After all she's done for you, and always written to you so nice, and sent you things from the city, and after you've taken care of Gram'ma Gard for her, an' done just what she sent word for you to do for her—why, you must be crazy to think of such a thing! I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll go over and see your gram'ma and warn her not to let—"

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Ma Dunlap! Do you think I want it horned all over town that I'm jealous of Jeff?"

"Well you've started the horning pretty well yourself by lettin' on this way this morning before your pa and Elmer."

"I know it. But don't you say one word to Gram'ma Gard about this matter."

"You know Colinette would cut her head off before she would do anything to mad Gram'ma Gard."

"She used to be that way when she lived here, but you'll find out that New York and France and the War and being away from gram'ma so long, has changed her a good deal."

"I s'pose that's true. But she's fond of us; we're all the folks she's got, and she wouldn't do anything to hurt us for the world. Now you mark what I say: She'll help git you ready and she'll stand up with you and put on all sorts of style. And here you are squalling because she's coming home. Why, Susan, she'll feel awful if she ever finds it out."

"She'll find it out quick enough, you needn't worry; Elmer'll tell her as soon as he gets a good chance."

"That's why I'm sorry you made such a fuss this morning. Why, Susan, you must learn to control your feelings better. When you're mar-

ried you'll find out that you just have to control an' control the whole livin' time. It's the women who don't learn to control their feelin's, and to let things that just break their hearts pass in silence, that git the divorces. Men won't stand for squalling and jawing. If there's any jawing to be done they want to do it themselves."

"It don't seem to me as if I could stand things like that!" declared Susan passionately.

"You ought not to plan to get married, then," responded her mother in her hopeless, colorless fashion, and went out to bring in Susan's things.

Susan sat staring at her plump, pink fingers upcurled in her lap. She was thinking very hard, and when her mother came back with her cloak, hat, and her veil trailing across her arm, she said, "mother, I've been thinking about my wedding—"

"Are you going to give it up?" asked her mother with a faraway little cadence of hope in her voice.

"Indeed not! But I'm going to hurry it up. I'm not going to wait till I can get clothes made, I'm going to tell Jeff that I'm willing to be married right away. He will be glad; he wants to be married right away. 'The sooner the better,' he said to me one evening. I can make my wedding clothes when we get back from our honeymoon trip."

"Maybe that will be best," admitted Mrs. Dunlap reluctantly. "I'd hate to have anything happen between you and Jeff—" she turned to make sure she had shut the parlor door behind her—"it would tickle the Pickenses so."

"Yes, wouldn't it! Think how Aunt Rinthy and Helen set their caps at Jeff, and how sore they've been ever since he took up with me."

Mrs. Dunlap smiled reminiscently. It had been the great triumph of a life almost wholly devoid of triumphs.

"I thought I wanted to wait until after Gertie Calkins's wedding and see how it was done, but now that Colinette is coming she will know all about weddings, and maybe I will have such a pretty one that Gertie will be patterning after me."

"That's the way to look at things," encouraged her mother. "Run along now and be happy," and she added when Susan was well down the walk, "while you can!"

Mrs. Dunlap went back into the parlor for a moment before rejoining her family at the breakfast-table. She shook her head slowly and her sunken mouth drew down at the corners in a twitching misery. She lifted her work-apron and pressed it against her lips, sobbing dryly. Whichever way things turned out, there was of

course, nothing for poor Susan but trouble. If she were to lose Jeff Plummer it would break her heart, and if she got him she would go the same dreary round that her mother had gone. Well, for some inscrutable reason of His own, God had willed that women must suffer.

"Where's she gone?" demanded Luther when his wife had resumed her place at the breakfast-table.

"To the store."

"Why didn't she come along and finish her breakfast like a sane person?"

"She's got her work cut out for her if she expects to keep Jeff Plummer tied to her apron-strings," remarked Elmer with a wise smile.

"Well, neither you nor Jeff are as smart as you think you be," growled Dunlap. He was proud enough of the Plummer alliance, but he was not entirely pleased with what Jeff and his crowd was doing for Elmer.

"Wha'd she go off without her breakfast for?" he began again.

"Why, Luther, you know it was what Elmer said that drove her off." It was all that Mrs. Dunlap could do to restrain her own tears.

"If John Gard's girl goes to foolin' round with the affairs of this family she's goin' to hear from me!" declared Dunlap, glaring at his wife as if

she alone were responsible for the coming of "John Gard's girl." "I don't see what's bringin' her here anyhow. Nobody wants her."

"It ain't John's girl nor anything to do with John's girl that upset Susan," whimpered Mrs. Dunlap. "It's the hectorin' way Elmer had this morning. He always has hectored Susan, and I s'pose he always will as long as he's got her round to hector." Mrs. Dunlap addressed her complaint to her husband as if they were alone, although Elmer sat grinning into his coffee-cup very well pleased with the condition he had brought about. "He won't have her to hector much longer, thank goodness; she'll be in a home of her own."

Mr. Dunlap twirled his neck and buttered a fresh piece of bread. "We've had about enough of this, Susan," he remarked loftily, and Elmer, knowing that his turn would come next, and having made a satisfactory breakfast, rasped his chair back and swaggered away.

At the millinery store the announcement of Colinette's coming made even more of a sensation than Susan had expected. Helen Pickens was not sure whether she was sorry or glad, but Gusta Klatz was quite sure that she was glad. The three young apprentices, who knew Miss Dunlap's cousin to be half owner of the business but had never seen her, were filled with a natural

curiosity and some apprehension. They made furtive inquiries of those who did know Miss Gard. Would she come "bossing around the store very much?"

The testimony elicited was so contradictory that they were fain to wait and judge for themselves.

"She won't come right out and scold," Helen Pickens testified, "but if there is something she doesn't like—don't you know, like a homely hat, or stitches showing, or—or—a person she doesn't like, or—maybe something funny about your dress, she'll look at it—sort of stare at it, don't you know—until you feel ready to—to—dear me, I don't know—"

Helen's explanation trailed off into silence while she held aloft and turned on her fist the child's hat she was finishing. The children's wear, and the few bonnets requiring ribbon ties for hopelessly old-fashioned ladies from the country, were Helen's special province; the strictly up-to-the-minute creations were evolved by Gusta Klatz and by Susan herself during the fleeting moments when she was not "out front" waiting upon customers. Helen's picture of the absent partner was not reassuring to the anxious apprentices, but Gusta Klatz seemed to see the shield from an entirely different side.

"She's a swell little dresser," she declared.

"She's good, too. You needn't be afraid of Colinette Gard. She's awful pretty but she's good, too. Why, I wouldn't be any more afraid of Colinette Gard than I would be of my own dear brother Willie when he comes home from overseas, bless him! Willie thinks there never was anybody like Colinette Gard. He just worships her."

"Oh, does he?" asked the round-eyed apprentice, "Somebody told us here in the workroom one day that your brother Willie used to be dead in love with Miss Dunlap."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Gusta, and flounced into the store—if going jerkily in a very tight short skirt could be called flouncing.

When Helen Pickens carried the news of Colinette's coming to her father and mother at dinner-time they were duly astonished.

"For the land's sake!" exclaimed Aunt Rinthy Pickens. "I wonder if she's kindah fizzled out in the art business and is comin' home to go into the shop again."

"I can tell you what's bringin' her," declared Waldo Pickens with a load of mashed turnip suspended halfway between his plate and his mouth, "it's on account of Susan's gettin' married. She's comin' to take over the milliner store, of course."

"She hasn't had time to hear about Susan's wedding," objected Helen. "Susan wasn't sure of it herself until the night before the opening."

"But Jeff an' Susan's been goin' together longer'n that," said Aunt Rinthy, "and don't tell me that Gram'ma Gard ain't that tickled over Plummer's young man takin' up with Susan that she ain't wrote and bragged about it to Colinette long ago."

"You bet, Rinthy, you're in the right of it," agreed Pickens. "Gram'ma Gard makes out she don't care, one way or t'other. So does Luther's wife, but you needn't tell me! I know by the way Luther is all lit up over the matter what the rest of 'em think. When they goin' to pull off the weddin'?"

"I don't know," replied Helen grumpily.

"We don't know an' we don't care," added Aunt Rinthy with a vindictive toss of her head which belied her words.

After Pickens had gone out to his work, mother and daughter discussed the news with more freedom.

"That's what's bringing her," said Mrs. Pickens with great decision, "she's goin' to run the store. Susan won't run that store after she's married, and don't you think it. Jeff won't want her to, an' Mrs. Plummer won't want her to."

"Susan told me that Jeff was perfectly willing that she should keep on with the business," witnessed Helen.

"But, don't you see, it's goin' to be a different matter after Jeff gits his mitt into the money drawer? Gram'ma Gard makes a good thing out of Colinette's share in the business and she's sharp enough not to let the Plummers have it all their own way after Susan and Jeff are married."

"I suppose that is so," acquiesced Helen, although she had never thought of the matter in that light before. "That is exactly what is bringing Colinette back. You've guessed it."

"You bet I have," boasted her mother with one of her flat, triumphant smiles. "If your pa had as much gumption as he thinks he has, he'd go down an' see Gram'ma Gard and try to buy out the business for you."

"Too late for that now," said Helen regretfully. "If we had tried that soon enough—before Colinette had made her plans, it might have worked."

"But who knew anything about their plans? They're so all-of-a-sudden like. Everything going along as usual when all at once, pop! Susan announces her engagement to Jeff Plummer, just like a bolt out of the blue, and before a person can think twice, here comes Colinette home to take over her half of the business."

"They've always been like that," said Helen.

"All stick together, the Gards and Dunlaps and let the Pickenses look out for themselves."

"Has Susan said anything about who she is calculatin' to have stand up with her?" asked Mrs. Pickens.

Helen's lip curled. "No, she hasn't said anything about it, and she won't need to now. Colinette will stand up with her; Colinette will choose the wedding dress and the silver and the minister and the place to go on the honeymoon. It will be Colinette from now on."

"You may be mistaken about that. After this Susan will have somebody else to consult. I guess Mr. Jefferson Plummer will do some of the planning from now on."

"Pooh!" sneered Helen. "Jefferson Plummer! Honest, ma, Jeff Plummer was in love with Colinette Gard from the moment she struck this town years ago when she was a little girl. Jeff Plummer will be dough—just dough—in Colinette Gard's hands. You see!"

IV

MISS GARD had reason to feel flattered at the large number of acquaintances gathered at the Red-moon railway station on the afternoon of her arrival. She was certainly astonished. She had expected her grandmother to be on hand—she was sure of a welcome from that quarter—and she had counted somewhat on seeing Susan, but the entire Pickens family quite took her by surprise.

Gusta Klatz had left the most dependable apprentice in charge of the store at the last moment and cantered three blocks, in a wholly millinerish and ladylike manner of course, in order to be on time to see the train pull in. The other two apprentices, supposedly on their way to their suppers, had detoured on a route which included the station.

Gertie Calkins was there with “papa’s car” to meet Dr. Snyder who had been attending the medical convention at Milltown and wasn’t expected to return for two days, but who, nevertheless, “might have been taken suddenly sick, or—something.” Lila Merton had come down to see her papa off to the convention; Lizzie Smith to

meet an expected friend (who failed to arrive) and many others, each with some plausible excuse to keep them from being classed with the merely curious.

However, the assembly was not uncommon enough to cause comment. Redmoon often let its supper cool in order to "make the six o'clock." It was to be regretted that the train arrived at such an inconvenient hour.

Colinette dropped her brown traveling bag upon the station platform when she lost herself in her grandmother's embrace.

"Dear lamb!" trembled Grandmother Gard, oblivious of the fact that others waited to welcome the visitor. "Dear girl, clear from New York, and tired to death, I s'pose!"

But Colinette denied this supposition and backed the denial by her appearance.

Lila, Dr. Merton's pretty daughter, and Gertie Calkins, Dr. Snyder's pretty fiancée, faced each other for the first time in weeks in their effusive welcome to their former schoolmate. Lizzie Smith, the dressmaker, managed to reach Colinette's hand before any of her remaining relatives could do so. She noticed with the interested eye of the professional seamstress that, in purchasing her suit, Miss Gard had had the courage to pay a good price for something inconspicuous.

"Natty! That's the word to describe it, and

that's all there was to it," reported Miss Smith later in describing the suit to her mother and business partner.

The two young millinery apprentices were alive to the effectiveness of the small hat with its sharply upturned brim and slant of eagle's feather.

Susan Dunlap, who had come down with Jeff in the Plummer car, absorbed all of these sartorial details at a glance. She also noted the fact that Colinette kissed no one but her grandmother. They two, Susan and Colinette, merely clasped hands and gazed into each other's eyes with an inquiring hostility.

Aunt Rinthy Pickens and Helen, plodding along Main Street on the way home, could see the dust of the Plummer car as it turned the corner in the direction of Grandmother Gard's house. Aunt Rinthy had not been given a chance to launch any of the winged arrows of suggestion for which she was famous because of Jeff Plummer's promptness and importance in gathering the newcomer with her baggage and immediate relatives into his car and whirling them out of reach. But she rehearsed a few on this homeward walk.

"Her hair is about eight shades darker'n it was when she went away," she mused. "Wonder what she put on it. Seems to me if I'd lived in New York as long as she has, and had been to

Paris besides, I'd a tried to look a little more dressed up when I first come home. But I s'pose she ain't had money to buy clothes with. It costs a lot just to pay board in the city."

"If she had needed money all she would have had to do would be to send word to Gram'ma Gard for some of her share of the milliner store money," Helen reminded her mother. "You remember pa said he didn't believe Gram'ma Gard was using a cent of the milliner money. He thinks she's living on her own interest money and saving all of the store money for Colinette."

"Well, what's she home for, then? There ain't a livin' thing for her to do here, now that Gusta Klatz and you are such good help in the store. I'll bet you lose your job even if Gusta don't. But so far as I'm concerned I don't care if you do. You've no business to be slaving down in that old milliner store anyhow. If your father hadn't been asleep when Mis' Chedder went out, you'd uv been owner of that store. But for you to be settin' in the back room stitchin' wire frames with the apprentices cuts me to the quick! So, as I said afore, I hope Colinette has come home to take up her old job. And if that ain't it, what has she come home for?"

"She would have been home before if it hadn't been for the War," said Helen. "It's perfectly

natural that she should want to see Gram'ma Gard."

"Maybe she's thinking of catching a man back here. She's—let's see-e-e—she must be goin' on twenty-three, ain't she? Yes, I know she is. She ain't far behind you and Susan. And I s'pose young men are pretty scurce back East now on account of the War, and pretty shy about marryin' with livin' as high as it is. I'm goin' to ask her if that's what she's back for—just in a joke. I'm goin' to say, 'it's a good thing Susan's got her young man cinched before you got back—' or something like that."

"Oh I wouldn't do that, ma," protested Helen, "she might get mad."

"Well let 'er if she wants to; I don't care. I ain't in any awe of John Gard's girl if she has been in New York for years. Her father was in New York and in Kalamazoo and Kansas, and it didn't do no great shakes for him. And I notice that those who sail out and do wonders in the city always come creepin' back to Redmoon and mighty glad to git back."

They turned the corner by the old Pettingill House and saw the Plummer automobile standing in front of Mrs. Gard's door.

"We must git our car out after supper," said Mrs. Pickens.

"Oh no, let's not," protested Helen. "Pa won't

want to drive. He'll want to go down and pump Colinette. He always does pump folks who have just come to town."

But in this matter of going out in the car Mrs. Pickens had her way. The Pickenses were not among those present at Mrs. Gard's little house that evening; just the Dunlap family, Uncle Luther, Aunt Susan, young Susan, Elmer and Jeff Plummer.

Young Susan wished devoutly that the male portion of the company would betake themselves to a corner and discuss baseball as was their habit. But no, while her mother and grandmother talked of turnip greens, the effect of the late frosts on the fruit buds, and painting the Dunlap back porch, Uncle Luther served as understudy to the absent Pickens in "pumping Colinette."

And so Neal Brackley was captain now, and still in France; and his mother permanently located in the South. Well, well, he wanted to know! And Colinette had been in France herself, had she? but hadn't seen either Brackley or Willie Klatz. Had she heard about Willie Klatz—all strung over with medals for bravery—Cross-de-Something-or-other? How long was she calkerlatin' to stay with her grandmother?

It was really a welcome interruption when Gusta Klatz and her mother came over to talk

about Willie, who might be home now any day.

During this conversation an idea dawned slowly in young Susan's mind: could it be that Colinette had returned to Redmoon because Willie Klatz was coming back? No, it was not likely that dainty Colinette Gard would care about big, clumsy Willie Klatz, no matter how many medals for bravery he could display.

She did not like the way Jeff sat and stared at her cousin with that look of dazed admiration. The sooner she and Jeff were married the better it would be for everybody's happiness. She watched her cousin narrowly for any flirtatious sign. Back in their schooldays Colinette had never been a flirt, but what might not four years of experiences have done to change a girl's disposition?

How graceful she was! Never seemed to think about clasping her hands so, or so, that they might appear to the best advantage; they seemed naturally to fall into the right place. And her little feet and silken ankles—

Susan wished devoutly that Colinette had stayed in New York!

It seemed to Grandmother Gard as well as to Susan that the hour for departure had been entirely overlooked by their visitors. Aunt Susan Dunlap succeeded at last in dragging her husband and Elmer home, yet still young Susan and her

lover stayed on. At last they, too, went, and Mrs. Gard and Colinette were left to themselves.

"Well, what do you think of this affair of Susan's?" demanded Mrs. Gard as soon as the door closed behind the last visitors.

Colinette said nothing for so long a time that her grandmother repeated the question. Then,

"I shall always be glad of any arrangement that will add to Susan's happiness," Colinette answered slowly.

"I know that," said Mrs. Gard, a little impatient at Colinette's platitude. "The question is, will marryin' Jefferson Plummer make Susan happy?"

"She seems to think it will, doesn't she?"

"She's perfectly silly!" declared her grandmother, "just plain silly over the matter, and so is Luther, and so is Elmer. It's the first time they've ever give Susan credit for doin' a smart thing. The gittin' into the milliner business they lay where it belongs—to you. And, of course, if it comes right down to facts, they can lay this match to you—"

"To me?" cried Colinette in consternation. "To me, grandmother?"

"Why, yes. If it hadn't been for you, Susan would never have got into the milliner business; and if she hadn't been in the milliner business, if she'd had to go out as a hired girl, she wouldn't had nice, stylish clothes to wear, way she has now.

I tell you, Colinette, Susan has been dressin' right up to the scratch for the last year or so. You certainly did set her foot on a stylish road when you got her into that milliner business. If she had been a hired girl, with two gingham dresses for every day, and one cheap black for best (black is allers good for a three-year stretch) do you think Mr. Plummer would have passed by Dr. Merton's daughter an' Helen Pickens an' took up with her? You know as well as I do he wouldn't."

"Did—he pass by Lila Merton and Helen?" asked Colinette in an awed sort of whisper.

"He certainly did. Aunt Rinthy was just set on gittin' him for Helen. She dined him an' wined him, as the sayin' is, for sure. She couldn't think it possible that our Susan would stand any show against Helen. She used to come down here an' say the meanest things about Susan's bein' a great overgrown—oh, well, you know how Aunt Rinthy is when she's peeved. With that ingrowin' smile of hers she said things that would a broke Susan's heart if she had heard 'em. Her mother and I never repeated 'em to Susan. We kept mum, but of course it was kind of a triumph when Susan come out ahead after all."

"Of course," agreed Colinette soberly.

"Aunt Rinthy has been kindah off to the hull of

us since she heard how the race come out. She just can't forgive Susan for gittin' along in the world. I expected she and Waldo and Helen would be down tonight, but instead of that they went off ridin' in their car. You knew they had a car, didn't you? It's a fine one, too; a good deal bigger and grander than the Plummer car."

"How nice," murmured Colinette in an absent way. "Is it easy to ride in?"

"Well, as to that, I can't say. I've never been asked to ride in it. But I don't wonder at that, because, as I said afore, there's kind of hard feelin's between the Pickenses and Dunlaps over this affair of Susan's. But, bless you! You mustn't think I care a mite about not bein' asked to ride out with the Pickenses."

"Of course you wouldn't," assented Colinette dreamily.

"Yet still I will say that if it was me who had the automobile, an' I overtook an old woman stumpin' off to prayer meetin' of a Thursday night, I'd slow up an' say 'jump in an' I'll give you a lift.' "

"Of course you would," said Colinette again, and Mrs. Gard realized that Colinette was feigning an interest she did not feel.

"And why should she?" reasoned Mrs. Gard. "Here I am, runnin' on about our little town stuff and she with her head full of her own doin's in

the city; her own triumphs, and failures, and love affairs—

“How are the Brackleys?” she asked suddenly.

“Why, I told you—”

“I know you did, but I mean, how is Neal especially? You know, I kindah thought you and Neal might make a match of it some day when you grew up.”

“Why grandmother!” said Colinette reproachfully, “think how Mrs. Brackley would feel if such a thing should happen to her beloved Neal—to marry a Gard from Redmoon!”

“But you ain’t a Redmoon girl any more; you’re a New Yorker. And you ain’t—” Mrs. Gard glanced toward the outside door and lowered her voice—“And you’ve kept your word and never told anybody that you ain’t my own—”

“Grandmother, I am your own, forever and forever!” Colinette took her grandmother’s cheeks between her two little hands. “You are my world and my heart’s desire! I don’t need anybody to love me but you, and my great trouble today is the same great trouble which was mine when I first came to live under your roof, and that is, that you may come to think me unworthy and—stop loving me.”

Mrs. Gard looked at her sternly. She realized her beauty, her youth, her four years of unprotected struggle in a great city—her experiences in

France. Her own remissness came to her with great force. Colinette had begged her to stay with her in New York and she had refused. She had been sinfully selfish; had argued herself into the belief that her prayers in Redmoon would do Colinette as much good as they would in New York, and meantime she could keep the boys from breaking her currant-bushes and heaving stones through the windows of her dear little gray house.

"Colinette," she demanded, "have you done what you promised gram'ma you would do—said your prayers every night of your life?"

"I think I have, all save—two nights."

"And how did you come to miss them two nights?"

"It was when I was on my way to France. We were four days out—a storm came up—it was a small boat—you see, grandmother, I really didn't want to be preserved till morning—I felt that it would be a relief to have it over—"

"Oh—yes—well, I've heard that seasickness is pretty bad. I guess if you've been a good girl all except that once you'll come along all right. Especially now that you're back here in Redmoon—"

"There isn't much difference between Redmoon and New York in the matter of being good, grandmother, and my besetting sin is as liable to attack me in the one place as in the other. You know what it is—following that old first motto of

mine instead of keeping to yours. Yours, that good old rugged motto, 'Honesty is the Best Policy,' while mine—"

"I remember well enough," owned grandmother. "But here in Redmoon—"

"Here in Redmoon it's going to be more of a struggle than it ever was in New York," declared Colinette solemnly. "In New York I worked hard; I had no time to think of anything but backgrounds, chiaroscuro, middle distance, and a scheme that would work out well in two colors on a magazine cover. In New York one has to stick strictly to business to stem the tide of ever-rising competition in the painting trade. But here—" she came and put two lovely arms about her grandmother's neck, she pressed red lips against her grandmother's lips, "but here, grandmother, you must help me and—and save me by keeping on loving me no matter how wicked I am."

V

THE apprentices caught their first glimpse of Colinette in the shop through what might be termed a dust storm. Miss Dunlap had arrived in a humor strange for her, who was usually patient and long-suffering under provocation. She arrived in what appeared to be a state of nervous tension over the visit of her business partner. Necessarily, in the front shop this condition was concealed in deference to customers, but in the workroom she whirled about "cleaning up," driving the scurrying apprentices before her like little brown leaves before a high wind. Consequently scissors lost themselves, hat frames, upturned and serving as baskets for the trimmings which were to adorn them, upset, spilling feathers, flowers and buckles broadcast. Surely this newly-arrived partner must be a veritable tigress, was the conclusion of the cowering girls.

Then she came; small, sober, unobtrusive to the point of extinction.

Susan introduced her to the three who were strangers to her and she shook hands with them all. And somehow, after that commonplace ceremony, each apprentice felt that she had been

singled out by Miss Gard as an especial friend. This the ogress? This the person Miss Dunlap had tried to make them believe would be critical as to the state of the waste-basket and the rug and the workshelves? Why, she was just like a little apprentice girl herself. Not a bit like the big, stormy Sue Dunlap, with her flashing black eyes and her way of tearing things up by the roots and then leaving them to right themselves.

And my! she was good to look at. With all that bronze-colored hair lying close to her little head, and that roseleaf skin, and those shadowy, rather heavy-lidded eyes, and that unsmiling red mouth.

Well, who couldn't be pretty in a hat bought in New York?

But when she took off her hat and put it on top of the children's order shelf, and went and curled up in the small chair under the window, she was prettier than ever.

No, it wasn't the hat; it must be the dress.

"This is my old place," she told them. "I wonder some of you haven't appropriated it."

Helen Pickens finished with a customer and came into the workroom bearing a hat which might have been a short length of stove-pipe in need of blacking. It was of the dust color favored that season, and from its inner depths spouted a fountain of "glycerined" ostrich feathers, de-

signed to be festooned in a certain savage way about the rim.

"Whose hat is that, Helen?" inquired Colinette politely.

"Mrs. Pottle's."

"Oh," breathed Colinette, "too bad!"

"Why too bad?" demanded Helen, focusing accusing glasses upon Colinette. "Mrs. Pottle is amply able to pay for it, and she ordered it from the pattern hat out in the case."

"But—it will be so unbecoming to her."

Helen laughed sarcastically. "I'd like to see anybody make a hat that would become Mrs. Pottle! Skin like a baked potato, hairy wart on her chin, and that little bunch of hair all wizened into a knot the size of—of—" Helen's powers of description failed her and she finished with a twirk of the neck bespeaking absolute disdain for Mrs. Pottle's personal attractions.

"Let's try, Ada—it is Ada, isn't it?" asked Colinette of the round-eyed apprentice, "let us try to make a hat which would be becoming to Mrs. Pottle."

Ada was fluttered and flattered. Helen sniffed. She gave the stovepipe to one of the other girls to wire and to line its inconsequential rim.

"And if you should make a hat which might become Mrs. Pottle, how would you go to work to make her take it?" demanded Helen with scorn.

Susan came sailing in like a decorated racing yacht, ribbons and pennons fluttering behind her.

"What's she after?" she inquired as Colinette passed her on her way to the front room.

"She doesn't approve of Mrs. Pottle's choice of a hat. She is going to help Ada to build a better one," Helen shrugged.

"Neither do I," declared Susan. "I thought when I saw you trying that wild thing on Mrs. Pottle that it would add the last touch to her beauty. Colinette could wear wild, hairy things like that, but Mrs. Pottle can't."

"But Colinette never does," murmured Gusta Klatz, skilfully drawing a piece of glistening black ribbon into a graceful bow and applying it flatly on a straw rim where it would do the most good.

Colinette came back with her selected materials which she piled in front of the apprehensive Ada. It was the first time that Ada, as yet a freshman in this school of headgear, had been allowed to try her skill on an entire hat. Her office hitherto had been that of wirer and liner.

It took all the afternoon to complete the experiment, and when it was finished no one in the shop approved of it in the least, not even Gusta Klatz, who usually thought whatever Colinette did was right.

The hat was of brown hemp, lined with pale

blue velvet. At the base of the sane crown nestled a wreath of conventionalized brown flowers, breaking into blue-and-gold in the matter of petals, and caught up on the right side by a foaming cascade of brown silk lace which dropped a bit from an uneven and softening rim.

"Light blue on Mrs. Pottle!" jibed Susan. "I supposed you would build a black hat."

"I remember that Mrs. Pottle loves color," murmured Colinette meekly, "why shouldn't she have it?"

"Because she is old and homely," said Helen.

"But the old and homely love color—and need it even more than the young. And they should have it—judiciously applied."

"You'll see what Mrs. Pottle will do to that hat," laughed Gusta.

Susan turned upon her almost fiercely. "Oh, if Colinette says so, she will take the brown hat. Everybody does what Colinette tells them to do."

But Susan did not really believe that Mrs. Pottle would take the brown hat, nor did Gusta, nor Ada, although that young person would have given a month's extra time to see her handiwork triumph.

"I don't know whether I made that hat or not," she confided to one of the other girls.

"Of course you did; she never so much as touched a finger to it."

"Well, shall I go on with the Pottle order or not?" inquired Helen severely.

"Of course," commanded Susan, and Helen brought in the savage model—made in the East—and began to copy, conscientiously and painfully, as she did all her work.

"You will wait on Mrs. Pottle when she comes in, I presume?" asked Susan of Colinette.

"Let Ada wait on her."

"Ridiculous!" snapped Susan. "The apprentices don't wait on the trade."

"This once, because—well, Ada made the brown hat, and is, therefore, interested in it; aren't you, Ada? You believe in it, don't you?" She was almost wistful in her inquiry. And Ada, knowing that she thoroughly believed in Colinette whether she did in the brown hat or not, answered that she did.

"One has to believe in a thing before one can impress it on others," said Colinette. "That, I think, is the reason so many ministers fail. They stand up and preach what their especial denomination requires them to say instead of what they really and truly believe themselves."

"Well, I've got a photograph of Ada Williams preaching that brown hat into Mrs. Pottle," sneered Susan.

"You'll come out front with me, won't you,

Miss Gard?" trembled Ada Williams the next day when Gusta Klatz stepped back into the workroom to announce with a wink and a grimace that "Mrs. Pottle had come for her order." Ada grasped the brown hat with trembling fingers, but Colinette motioned her to put it down and take Mrs. Pottle's original order which had just been lined.

Helen watched this maneuver jealously. The symbol of savagery was her sale and her manufacture; she distinctly hoped it might—and believed it would—triumph.

Another bevy of buyers arrived, and Susan went out to wait upon them. Helen sat stitching in a rigid silence. The apprentice girls listened, but could distinguish nothing of the Pottle case amid the confusion of women all talking at once.

Then the door flew open and Ada Williams bounced in, caught up the brown hat and disappeared with it into the store. Had Helen been familiar with pugilistic reports she would have described the situation as the end of the first round and she, Helen, hanging on the ropes.

Ten minutes more, then the triumphant Ada, bearing Helen's handiwork in victory before her like an enemy's helmet captured in battle, swept into the workroom.

"She took the brown!" she announced, and twirled the disdained helmet upon the worktable.

Helen's lips tightened. "So Colinette managed it after all, did she?" she snapped.

"Miss Gard had hardly anything to do with the sale," boasted Ada. "She just sat and talked while Mrs. Pottle tried on hats. When Mrs. Pottle put on this one," Ada took up the palm grove, "Miss Gard looked sort of—of—hurt, you know, as if something displeased her. Mrs. Pottle asked her if she liked it, and Miss Gard said that it was very stylish, and that that particular shade of mud seemed to be very much in favor this season."

"Did she say that?" cried Helen. "Did she say 'mud'?"

"Yes, she did," laughed Ada, "and then Mrs. Pottle took off the hat, turned it round and round and upside down, looked into the crown and said, 'Tis mud, ain't it? I wish I'd never ordered it.' Now that was every word that Miss Gard had said—so far," declared Ada.

"Every word!" sneered Helen, "What other word was needed beside that one word MUD!" She snatched the hat out of the girl's hand. "That hat is taupe! Not 'mud'!"

"It's mud now so far as Mrs. Pottle is concerned," laughed Ada, with a newly acquired importance of manner.

"Go on, Ada," urged one of the other girls, "then what was said?"

“Nothing much. Miss Gard said that, being a painter, perhaps she was over fond of colors, and Mrs. Pottle said she just loved colors, but was afraid to wear ’em because she was so mottled, or tanned, or something. And then Miss Gard said that she needed pretty, pure colors to offset that mottledness. She didn’t say, ‘Oh no, Mrs. Pottle, you’re not mottled or tanned,’ or anything like that; she just let it stand that she was a mottled Pottle and let it go at that, but that the mottledness could be softened by the right combination of colors. Then she turned to me and said, ‘Ada, dear, bring that brown hat that I saw in the workroom this morning—the one with the pretty blue lining under the rim, and that softening fall of brown lace’—and, honest to goodness, that’s about all she did say, except that on account of her red hair she had to be very careful what she wore in hats. She just sat—sober, like that, you know, while Mrs. Pottle put on the brown hat. And, honest, girls, if I do say it that shouldn’t seeing that I designed it—”

A whoop of derision arose.

“Well, anyway, I made it after her design—well—honest to goodness! I never saw anything melt into and rub out mottledness as that brown and blue did. The brown, somehow, being sort of the same shade as Mrs. Pottle, seemed to draw

your attention away from her brown to its own; and the blue lining seemed to—to—sort of—”

“Don’t strain yourself, Ada,” advised Helen acidly, as the others came swarming back from the front, Gusta squealing with laughter at the triumph of the brown hat, Susan not so well pleased, but reiterating “I told you so,” and Colinette demurely reaching for her own hat and saying that she must go now, that Grandmother Gard was planning to have bacon and greens for supper and she had promised to look over the spinach.

But even after she was gone the irritability and absent-mindedness which had taken possession of the mistress of the establishment remained. The following day it was enhanced by a call from Gertie Calkins who came in to talk about weddings and veils and rings. All this, of course, was very confidential, the interview taking place in the front shop behind the lace curtains, and with the workroom door securely closed.

“We have almost decided,” said Gertie, “on the thirtieth of June. What is your date?”

Susan could not reveal this secret as the date of her own wedding had not as yet been decided upon. She resolved, then and there, that it should be so decided at once. She blamed herself that it had been postponed so long.

She sent one of the girls to the warehouse with a note for Jeff Plummer asking him to call at the store that day as soon as possible after six o'clock.

The apprentice was gone a long time—too long, Susan decided, and reproved her sharply on her return.

"I couldn't help being gone a long time," pouted the apprentice, "I had to run all over town before I found him. He wasn't in the elevator, nor in the office. They said he had gone home. I thought, Miss Dunlap, that you wanted him to get your note, so I went over to Plummer's house with it—"

"Well?" broke in Susan impatiently.

"—and he wasn't there—"

"Well?"

"His mother said she guessed he was over to your house; that he had started off in that direction. So I started for your house—"

"Well?"

"And when I went by that house, just this side of the old Pettingill place I saw the door open and him standing in the door, so I—"

"That will do. Go back to your work; I'm much obliged."

Susan stopped, dragged a box of hat-frames from under the counter where they belonged and carried them around to the other side where they did not belong, and where they had never been

before. She opened the money drawer, counted the change without sensing the amount, shut it again, sat down at the desk, got up immediately and frowned heavily at a woman who came smiling in to select a hat for her little daughter.

How could she wait until six o'clock! How could she pass the dragging hours away! Listen to Gusta's placid conversation about Saturday's orders, and the apprentices tittering among themselves, and Helen Pickens inquiring who had seen the buckram roll, and all the round of business which was so interesting when one was happy, but so maddening when one was in this state!

She called the apprentice to her in the front shop and put the question to her which she had been too angry to put before: Had she, at last, given Mr. Plummer the note? And what had he done with it?

"Stuffed it into his pocket without reading it." Susan longed to rise like Cleopatra and strike down the bearer of such news!

And that was the pitiful part of the affair; this grinning little apprentice knew the horrible truth of her jealousy, the other two knew it, Helen Pickens and Gusta Klatz and Colinette herself, and that was worse than all the others put together—Colinette, whom Susan loved as she had never loved anybody else except Jeff and her mother! That all her poor triumph and happi-

ness should be turned to mockery by one so dear. It was matter for tears sure enough!

Six o'clock, and Main Street deserted. Had he read the note at all? Had he read and ignored it? Susan's anger was high, but she overruled it. Whatever happened, she must not offend Jeff. She held his fealty by too slender a thread for that. And to break with him now, after the triumph of her conquest, would be a humiliation too great to be borne.

Once more she realized the slavery of her position. To be always dissembling—trimming; to fawn when she felt like raging! Slavery—that's what it was, and nothing less.

But her mother had said that all women suffered it; that it was woman's lot and—

Oh, Jeff at last!

VI

ONE might have thought it was Jeff who had cause to be displeased. He appeared sullen, so much so in fact that Susan found it hard to broach the subject which she wished to discuss. It was not easy to ask a young man to agree to an early marriage date when that young man stood with his back against the counter scowling and inquiring "what she wanted" in a most aggressive manner.

"Gertie and the doctor have decided on the date of their wedding."

"Have they?"

"Yes, Jeff, and I thought perhaps—"

"Well?"

"That we had better set our date. We don't want to be too far behind them, do we?"

"I don't see why their wedding need cut any ice with us."

"But—Gertie was in today and she wanted to know what we had decided on, and I felt cut up because I couldn't tell her."

"I don't think I'd let Gert Calkins influence me one way or the other."

"I don't."

"Well, then, what you kickin' about?"

Susan was making a mighty effort for control. "Jeff, perhaps you would rather never be married to me at all." Susan's cheeks were blazing, her lips trembling.

"Awh, come on, Sue, let's not have any of these tantrums. Don't turn on the waterworks; 't'ain't becoming to your style of beauty. What's the use of hanging on to Gert Calkin's skirts? Let her get married when she pleases and let us do the same."

"All right, then; when do you please? I'd like to know so as to make my plans. It is supposed to be the bride's privilege to set the wedding day, but in this case it seems to be reversed. I—I love you, Jeff, and I want to please you, and I shall always try to please you, but—I think I have a right to know what to plan on."

"Well, what's the use of our tying up with a wedding and all the fixings when there is a whole summer of good times ahead? What's the matter with Christmas?"

An old woman with a bunchy bundle of the familiar type, broad at base, tapering to a twisted point which served as a handle, appeared suddenly on the doorstep.

"All right, Jeff. Good night."

Jeff shot out like a homing pigeon loosed for flight, and Gusta, coming on the heels of the old woman, was left to attend her while Susan

plunged into the back room and into a storm of tears.

It was thus that Gusta found her some ten minutes later when the woman with the bonnet had been satisfied and sent on her way.

"Sue dear! Sue dear!" mourned the sympathetic Gusta, "what is the matter? Been having another fuss with him? Now hush up! Hush up! Helen will be here in a minute, and you don't want to give her the satisfaction of seeing you this way. You better just skip out the back door and run home. I'll tell Helen you had a headache. Come now, brush up. They say that's always the way with sweethearts—always a fight of some kind on. I'm glad I haven't any."

"Gusta, he's in love with Colinette!"

"How silly! Colinette wouldn't look at him."

"All the worse."

"Well, that's the way with me, I guess. All but Willie—"

Susan shut her lips hard and went and got her hat and veil. When Gusta began on the subject of her brother Willie her desirability as a comforter was at an end. At the back door Susan paused to ask desperately, "Gusta, would you have believed it of Colinette?"

"What?" asked Gusta. "Believe what? I don't see that Colinette has done anything."

"He was there at that old studio with her this afternoon. I wish that thing would burn up!"

"Oh, Susan, that's awful mean of you. She loves that studio. She's hauled out that picture of the Pickenses' back yard that she started so many years ago. She says she is going to make a wonderful picture of that. She isn't thinking of Jeff Plummer, not for one minute; she's thinking how the snow blew off Pickenses' chicken house in straight lines, and how ghostly the barn loomed, and the trees, and all."

"She had no business to come here at all!"

"My goodness. Sue, you can't expect everybody to leave town for fear Jeff will get off the track. I wouldn't give much for a fella who had to wear blinders for fear he'd see some other girl that he liked better than me—"

Susan flung herself away and banged the back door after her.

"All singing the same story!" she stormed. "And the answer is that Jeff Plummer doesn't care a fig for me, and doesn't care who knows it! I see plainly enough how it is going to turn out; I shall lose him, and it will be *her* fault! We were going on smoothly enough before she came home. He was even urging me to set an early date for our wedding. Said it couldn't happen any too quick to suit him. Now he says 'Christmas,' and 'what's the use of tying ourselves up

with weddings and all that fuss when there is a whole summer of fun ahead of us?' Is that the way for a man in love to feel? What does he mean by 'a whole summer of fun ahead' unless he means flirting with her? That's what she came for! I hate her!

"Oh, what am I saying! What am I thinking! Little Colinette! More than a sister always! What would Gram'ma Gard think of me if she could look into my head—or heart, or wherever it is that meanness and jealousy live! Oh what a horrid thing love is—I mean the love between a man and a woman—the marrying love! You must forget your mother and your grandmother and your cousin; you must forget all the kindnesses of old times and stand guard over your lover like an old pussycat over her young—or lose him! Of course all that comes to an end after you are married— But does it?"

Susan had wept freely so far on her way home, wiping her eyes and nose and polishing her cheeks as she had need. She had been crossing the Baptist lot behind the church, but now she had reached the sidewalk on the back street and was in danger of being seen. She gave her flushed face a final wipe. It had done her good—this chance to let herself go for a brief space.

At home her mother cast surreptitious glances at her and tried to divert the attention of her

husband and stepson from her daughter's swollen, tellable features. After supper she followed Susan upstairs to her own room and inquired apprehensively as to the cause of her unhappiness.

"Of course I'm troubled, ma, and unhappy. I always shall be now I suppose. Didn't you say that an engaged girl or a married woman had little else to expect? You said I'd got to learn to expect such things and to overlook 'em, didn't you? Well, I'm trying to learn to do what you say is best, and I wish you wouldn't pester me with questions. I have lots to stand, but I'm going to brace up and stand it if it kills me!"

Mrs. Dunlap sighed and went away downstairs. None knew better than did she how poorly equipped Susan was to "stand things," a term which in the elder Susan's mind meant just a stoical silence and a bending to the storm whether of jealousy, abuse, or overwork.

The weeks which followed tested Susan's powers to the utmost. Colinette was—or pretended to be—absorbed in that snow picture of the back yard. At any time of day she was to be found standing before her big easel, an enormous palette hanging from one little pink thumb, daubing umber shadows under the sharp edge of the bank where the snow drifted over, or experimenting with a wintry sky and a struggling sun seen through feathery, flying snow.

She was almost sure to have a caller or two, and sometimes more, perched about in the spare chairs; callers who asked insane questions, or retailed Redmoon gossip to indifferent ears.

Jeff Plummer spent more hours in the studio than he realized. It angered him to find so many others roosting about in the way; Lila Merton; Gertie Calkins, talking always about the doctor and her fast-approaching marriage and negotiating with Colinette to be her bridesmaid; Colinette's grandmother, piecing quilt blocks and making sarcastic remarks about "putterin' with such useless work" as that which Colinette was so absorbed in. If she was goin' to paint a picture why didn't she go out into the pasture where it was all so green and nice now, pick out a couple of Uncle Waldo's good fat Jerseys standin' knee deep in the brook, and paint them. Something with some git up an' git! That snow, flyin' off the roof of Waldo's henhouse made her shiver even here in summer. And every day, instead of the weather breakin' and clearin' a little, the storm seemed to git worse.

"You'll have that henhouse snowed under and lost entirely if you keep on," she admonished.

Sometimes different members of the Pickens family dropped in on their way to or from work. Jeff could stand any of these except Aunt Rinthy herself.

“Well,” she would ejaculate, appearing suddenly in the doorway before a fellow had a chance to make himself scarce, “what you doin’, hangin’ round here again? You was here yesterday when I come down. You takin’ paintin’ lessons?” Then she would walk over behind Colinette and inspect her work.

“My land! Ain’t you got that thing done yet? If it takes such a long time to paint the barn and the henhouse, how long would it take to paint the front of the place, I’d like to know? I wish you’d a started in with the front instead of the back, then maybe we’d bought it an’ had it framed for the parlor. But, mercy! I wouldn’t have such a dreary performance as that hangin’ before my face an’ eyes. I do hate snow. Why, that’s worse’n it was yesterday. Bur-r-r-r! the way that snow slithers off the edge of that bank there puts me in mind of the winter the turkeys all died on us. Why don’t you paint the barbed wire in on them fence posts? Yes, but there is wire, ain’t they? And you know it, an’ I know there’s wire. It makes it look as if Waldo was a pretty shiftless farmer to have a row of fence posts stickin’ up with no wire on ’em. But, honest, I’ve seen the snow swizzle off that barn roof just exactly like that. But it’s far from bein’ pleasant to look at, and I can’t *im-agine* what a body would paint it for!”

When she had succeeded in clearing the studio and getting Colinette alone, Mrs. Pickens would unroll her crochet (she scorned Grandmother Gard's patchwork as hopelessly out of date) settle her scant black skirt, brushed an imaginary speck of dust from the sleeve of her freshly ironed white waist, and begin the afternoon's program:

Did Colinette think Gram'ma Gard had failed any since she had been away? Well, she had, just the same. There was a big difference in the way she got around nowadays and the way she used to git round. But, of course, it was to be expected; gram'ma was gittin' along now.

Had Colinette heard that Jeff and Susan had postponed gettin' married till in the winter sometime? Seemed awful funny why they had done that. They had talked one while of steppin' off the same day that Gertie Calkins and young Dr. Snyder did. Now to put it off till winter—

Of course it was Jeff's doin's—puttin' it off. He knew he could pick Susan up any old time. Susan had been tickled to death to ketch him, and all the family had been tickled to death at the match. It wasn't such a great ketch either; Helen Pickens wouldn't wipe her old shoes on Jeff Plummer. There was a time, after he quit hangin' round Gertie Calkins that he had started in to rush Helen. Yes-s-s! Helen could a had

him hands down if she'd wanted him. But Helen was altogether too partic'lar. Sometimes Helen's mother thought that Helen never would marry; she was so partic'lar.

But Susan Dunlap had been pretty much set up because she had captured Jeff Plummer. But she wasn't half so much puffed up over the affair as Luther was. My land! One would think it was Luther's own daughter instead of just a step-daughter that had caught Marcus Plummer's son. The hull family was set up over it, only Gram'ma Gard tried to make believe she didn't think much of the match. But that was all put on.

One thing sure, Susan Dunlap would never have caught him if she hadn't been proprietor of a payin' business and slung a good deal of style. Because she wa'n't anything for looks—so big an' black an' blowsy, like all the Gards—or—er—most of 'em, unless they had red hair or—something.

Had she ever heard anything more from her relatives on her mother's side?

Here an old temptation would assail Colinette to gratify the Pickens appetite for uncomplimentary details regarding her mother's people, but she overcame it.

No, she had never heard anything more from them. They had evidently forgotten her entirely, if any were still living.

“Well, out of eleven aunts—that’s what you told when you first came to live with Gram’má Gard, wasn’t it—that you had eleven aunts and all red headed? Well, the whole ’leven couldn’t be dead, surely.”

On the first of June the firemen gave their annual ball, and everybody in Redmoon who was anybody attended whether they danced or not. Not Grandmother Gard; she did not believe in dancing, but almost everybody else. Aunt Rinty Pickens, in a dark blue satin, sat beside Mrs. Smith the dressmaker and watched their respective daughters, both in pale-colored crêpe, Lizzie’s lavender, Helen’s gray with silver trimming; watched jealously and not without reason, if the truth be told, the young men crowding for Colinet’s favors.

Colinette, in a scant little dress of deep, sea green clinging material, girdled with make-believe emeralds, danced with grace and abandon. The watching women noted, and commented on the fact that Jeff Plummer danced with her as often as he could capture her, and followed her with his eyes when she was dancing with some one else. They also made comments about Susan Dunlap, who did not dance, but sat with the older women, sullen and unhappy-looking.

“Seems to me,” whispered Aunt Rinty Pickens

to the dressmaker, "if I had such a good dancer as Jeff Plummer for a beau, I'd learn to dance myself."

"Just what I was thinking," responded Mrs. Smith. She bent her gray little face close to Mrs. Pickens and spoke without moving her lips. "Seems to me she dances well for a girl brought up a strict Methodist. There ain't much to that dress, is there? But what there is of it is very effective. It's just a green chemise—that's all it is—but that girdle gives the whole thing tone. But suppose I should try to get such dancing frocks on to Redmoon girls, do you think they'd wear 'em? No mam!"

"I don't care for it myself," replied Aunt Rinty, and sought out her own daughter—resting for the moment—with her flutings of white lace, drapings of gray, silver-beaded crêpe, and stiff little rosettes of gray ribbon. "I tell my sister-in-law—Brother Luther's wife, you know—that if I was in her place, I'd pull off Susan's weddin' as soon as the Lord would let me. Young men nowadays are pretty shifty, and a new face—you know—"

Mrs. Smith nodded vigorously. "Yes-s-s- indeed! And Sue Dunlap isn't a girl to pick up a match any old time. She's a tasty dresser, but sort of—of large and ungainly, and—well, you know—sort of coarse and high-colored. She

isn't a man's girl by any means. Now that Gard girl—she's a man's girl if ever there was one. She'll have beaux wherever she is."

Mrs. Pickens twirled her head and smiled her flat smile.

"Don't understand myself what they find to admire in her—red headed and undersized—but, as you say, the boys all seem to take to her."

Mrs. Pickens went home firmly convinced that she had discovered the reason of Colinette's return to Redmoon. Life had gone hard with her out in the world earning her own living, and she had returned with the deliberate purpose of ousting Susan Dunlap and taking the very desirable position of daughter-in-law to the Plummers herself.

VII

THE day after the dance Susan met her lover on the street and they quarreled fiercely. Afterwards she humbled herself in the dust in a futile effort to regain her lost footing in his regard. She left the store in the middle of the afternoon unable to endure the covert glances, sympathetic and otherwise, of the shop girls, and the comments of Lizzie Smith, Gertie Calkins and Lila Merton who came in to "talk over the dance." Her head ached, her eyes saw nothing save a slim figure flying lightly in the arms of entranced young men. She no longer fought against her hatred for Colinette—hatred, that's what it amounted to—hatred, and a terrifying surprise; the surprise of a child who has been unjustly punished by the mother it loves and trusts. Colinette, who had brought her all the good luck she had ever known, had now struck a blow at her happiness which would hurt forever. In all the years to come, whether she married Jeff Plummer or not, she should never feel toward Colinette any of the old affection. Colinette had "cut her out," had (Susan was convinced of it since last night) traveled halfway across the country for

the purpose of taking her sweetheart away from her. Colinette could have many sweethearts, she—Susan—but one, and wished for no more.

Of course, there had been Willie Klatz, but Willie Klatz had never counted with Susan.

Her mother looked up wanly when Susan entered the house. She had not been present at the dance, but Elmer had, and had repeated the flying gossip to both her and his father.

Susan passed through the sitting room into the kitchen and sat down by the west window. The sunlight lay pleasantly across the quiet garden, and the row of gooseberry bushes which formed the boundary between the Dunlap and Klatz lots. It struck a corner of the Klatz side porch where Mrs. Klatz was shelling peas for supper. She wore a contented smile. Anyone could see, even at that distance, that she was happy—was satisfied with things as they were. Her husband was true and loving, her girl industrious and helpful, her boy coming safe home from the War soon loaded with medals for bravery and with a lieutenant's straps on his sleeve—why shouldn't Mrs. Klatz be happy! The sparrows twittering above her head were happy; the cat with tiger bars, stepping so stealthily out towards the Klatz woodshed, was happy and important, as a well fed mother cat always is important. Everybody and

everything happy except poor Susan Dunlap. She alone was forlorn, forsaken, desperate.

Her mother came into the kitchen. "What's the matter, Susan?"

As usual Susan began to weep, telling her mother in broken sentences what her mother already knew.

"Your father's half a mind to have it out with Colinette," Mrs. Dunlap whimpered. "He says it's ridiculous that John Gard's girl has come here and upset everything. He's a good mind to pitch into her about it."

"Why Ma Dunlap, don't let him do such a thing! Don't you dare let him do such a thing! Do you know what would happen? Colinette would look up at him with that impudent droop of the eyelids and ask him coolly what she had done? And then what would he say? 'Why, you danced with Jeff Plummer at the firemen's ball.' 'Well, is there any law against that? Didn't I go to the ball to dance with folks?' 'But he hangs round your studio?' 'Well, doesn't Elmer and Aunt Rinthy Pickens and Gram'ma Gard hang round the studio?'"

"And then she'd say something ridiculous that would make him feel like thirty cents—oh no, ma, you can't fight love battles as you'd fight the Germans with gunpowder and hard steel. It's

like fighting ghosts; you hit out, and your hand goes right through your enemy, and the bystanders laugh.

"Oh ma, I wish you'd let me die when I was a baby! If I ever was married and had a girl baby I'd—why, I believe I'd drown it! A girl never can be happy any way you fix it."

"Don't you think Colinette is happy?"

"Oh, I don't know. I hope she isn't. I hate her!"

"Oh, Susan, that's awful wicked," wailed her mother.

"I know it, but it's the truth just the same. And I shall always hate her now, no matter what happens; no matter what she should do—now—to be nice to me, I can never like her again! It's awful, ma; it's like hating you or gram'ma! It's awful! It's driving me crazy! If it was something I could pitch into her about—have it out—but as I said before, it's like fighting ghosts."

"Yes, it is," agreed her mother, her lips puckering in sympathy.

"And to have Lila Merton grinning and hinting, and Helen Pickens hinting and grinning, and telling what her mother said to Lizzie Smith's mother, and what Lizzie Smith's mother said to her! And Gertie Calkins the worst of the lot—planning about her wedding and bragging about 'the doctor'— Oh, what shall I do! What shall

I do! I want to be happy! I want to be let alone to go on liking Jeff and Jeff liking me, and folks won't let me!" Susan dropped her head upon her arms, folded on the kitchen table, and wept aloud.

Her mother tried to quiet her. Someone was coming in at the front door, but Susan was beyond caring who came, or who saw her misery and humiliation.

It was Mrs. Gard who came straight through to the kitchen and into that emotional whirlpool.

Although Susan had forbidden her mother to allow her stepfather to approach Colinette, yet when Mrs. Dunlap broke forth with reproaches to Mrs. Gard, Susan let her go on. It was high time something was done, for she could not endure this jealous misery much longer.

The elder Susan set forth the younger's case against Colinette with a bitter completeness born of young Susan's suffering.

"I don't see, after all, what Colinette's done, or what she can do," Mrs. Gard broke into the storm of complaint to protest. "As near as I can understand, all Colinette's done is to look too pretty and dance too well. She ain't never gone off alone with Jeff Plummer, or kept company with him in the parlor, or took presents off him, now has she? No. Well, what in the world do you want her to do; singe the hair off her head,

or gash her pink cheeks, or gouge out her eyes or—whatever?”

“There, ma,” cried Susan, lifting a face of anger and suffering, “I told you you’d get no satisfaction from gram’ma, or Colinette, or anybody! Now I guess you’ll believe me. Fighting ghosts—that’s what you’re doing, and you might as well give up! I wish I were dead and buried, and that’s all there is to it! Now don’t either one of you say another word, for I won’t listen!”

Her grandmother drew her chair close to Susan. “See here, Susan,” she began, laying a warm firm hand over her granddaughter’s, “I’m just as sorry over this business as you or your mother. I can’t understand it any more’n you can. She just worships you; I know that, and what makes her act as she does I don’t see. But I want to say this: I never knowed her to go against my wishes after she fully realized what my wishes were, and I’m goin’ to have a good talk with her an’ see what I can do— Now, now, you needn’t say a word,” for Susan had begun a noisy objection, “I’m goin’ to do it! I will even send her away, and you know that would almost break my heart! Because I’m—why, I’m awfully bound up in her. But now mark me, Susan—and this is the truth—I think more of you than I do of her, and you know it.”

Susan glanced at her mother and her mother

at Susan, and both smiled wintery, unbelieving smiles which nettled the grandmother more than an open accusation would have done.

“You don’t believe that, I s’pose?” She paused aggressively but both Susans remained silent, and Mrs. Gard proceeded:

“As you say, we’re fightin’ ghosts; something—what’s that big word?—intangible—that’s it. If Colinette had stole your breastpin, or wrote a love letter to your beau, or gone off ridin’ with him into the country, why, it would be easy enough to git at her and to punish her. But she ain’t done nothin’ of the kind, which makes it pretty hard to—what’s that word Mrs. Smith used that time when Colinette got ahead of her in buyin’ out the milliner store?”

“Cope,” Susan furnished with a hysterical giggle.

“Yes, cope, that’s it. She said Colinette was hard to cope with, and I guess she’s right, but I’m goin’ to try it a hack, Susan. I’m goin’ to see what I can do to patch up this muddle. She ain’t no business cuttin’ in on your love affair and makin’ you unhappy, I don’t care what she is nor who she is. And you mustn’t for one minute think I take her part in this affair—not if she’s guilty—”

“There you go!” cried Susan, “she won’t own to being guilty—why, gram’ma, before you talk

with Colinette ten minutes you will think her the most abused little girl in Redmoon. She will say she never thought of Jeff Plummer; that she doesn't care a whistle for him. And that's the pity of it, she probably doesn't. That's the cruel part of it, because I do care for him. I'd go through fire and water for him. I've wanted him ever since we went to school together, and then, just when we got engaged, and Jeff had said he wanted to be married as soon as possible—couldn't be too soon for him, those were his very words—then comes— Oh, well, what's the use of going over it all again!"

"Ain't no use," agreed Mrs. Gard, "we all understand what is to pay. I'm goin' to have a heart to heart talk with her and see where she stands anyway."

"Will you tell me what she says, gram'ma?" asked Susan wistfully.

"I don't know anything to hinder," said Mrs. Gard. "Meanwhile, Susan, do you brace up an' go along and tend to your milliner business as if nothing had happened. Don't let folks see how bad you feel. Don't let your beau catch a glimpse of your feelin's. A man never likes a woman any better for her blubberin' over him. If you could bring yourself to step out with some other fellah for a while it might bring him to terms."

"Other fellows are so numerous," sneered Susan, "just lying in wait for girls like me! That's the way it is nowadays; every girl wants a lover, and about one in ten gets one. The other nine can sit around and grin and make believe they prefer being old maids. It was different in your day, gram'ma; then there were boys enough to go round."

Mrs. Gard sat in deep thought a moment, then said slowly, "Even in my day, Susan, there was girls who didn't git the man they wanted. They made shift with somebody they would rather not have had. But they kept still about it, and made the best of it. And I'll say right here, that some of 'em in after years was mighty glad they didn't git the one they thought they loved to distraction. They found out that the man the Lord seen fit to give 'em was a good sight better choice than the one they in their ignorance would have picked for themselves.

"This fallin' in love is one of the queerest affairs we have to contend with—or to 'cope with,' as Mrs. Smith would say. A girl in love don't know no more why she is in love than a man knows why he is in love. I sometimes think there's too much stress put on what is called love.

"Now you think you're dead in love with Jeff Plummer: Why are you? Is it because he's

good or kind or industrious?" Mrs. Gard did not wait for her granddaughter to answer this question; she answered it herself:

"No, it's because he makes a great show on the baseball field; because his back is straight and his legs quick and graceful.

"And what does he see in you to like? Does he like you because you are good to your ma and gram'ma, and because you ain't afraid of work? No, he likes you because your brown dress is becomin', and your hat is pretty, and you know how to fix your hair.

"'Course, after you're married and time gits in its work, his legs will git crooked and spindly and his back will begin to bend; your brown dress will wear out, your hair will thin, and all the things that you married him for, and all the things that he married you for, will fade out of existence.

"But—an' this is the answer to the hull question—if he has got good points, and if you have good points, they'll shine out in times of trouble, and then you'll really begin to love each other in spite of crooked backs and thin hair. That old, middle-aged feelin' that you just can't git along without each other—that's what I call Love!

"That kind of love is blind, blind as a week-old kitten. It don't see wrinkled skin and stoopin'

shoulders. When that comes to take the place of the other, then you can make up your mind that you're really in love."

Susan wiped her eyes, got up and went to the little kitchen glass to survey the havoc done to her complexion. She made futile little dabs at her eyes and cheeks; she wiped her inflamed nose and then, overcome again by a wave of self pity, wept afresh and found herself right back at the beginning.

"I wish I could go right away from here," she moaned. "I'm no good at making believe I'm happy when I'm just dying of unhappiness! I never could do it and I can't help it. And just think what pa will say, and Elmer, and all the rest! If you could have heard what I had to stand this morning in the shop. First Gertie Calkins: 'Shall you wear a veil, Sue? And shall you make it of lace or of gauze?' And there I was just fresh from a horrid quarrel with Jeff, he telling me that if I didn't like this or that, he couldn't help it; and that if I expected to keep him in one of my bandboxes I'd guessed wrong; and why hadn't I learned to dance, then, instead of being too lazy to learn—oh, I could have killed him!"

"Tch-tch!" sighed Mrs. Dunlap, and wiped her own eyes.

Grandmother Gard shook her head too. "No,

you can't really call that true love," she admitted.

Susan at once sprung to the justification of her case: "Yes, it is true love, too! It's just the kind that gets to be that other kind after you are married. If a girl isn't ever jealous of a man, why then she doesn't love him very much."

Mrs. Gard did not argue the point. She sat still turning the matter over in her own mind.

"You said a little while ago that you didn't think Colinette cared a rap for young Plummer; if she don't care for him what's she doin' this trick for?"

"What would Lila Merton or Lizzie Smith do it for?"

"I s'pose either Lila Merton or Lizzie Smith would marry him a flyin' if they could git him, wouldn't they?"

"'Deed they would," acknowledged Susan proudly. "They both tried to get him before he took up with me for good."

"Well, then, there would be a reason for either one of them making up to him. But if, as you say, Colinette don't care for him that way—"

"Well, that's what I don't know; she may care for him that way too. Who knows what's inside of her head? Doesn't it seem queer what she is doing back here, gram'ma?"

Mrs. Gard looked hurt. "She said it was to see her folks. I don't think that it ought to

seem so queer that she should want to visit her old gram'ma who brought her up and who is the only family she's got."

"It looks to me," said Mrs. Dunlap, "as she had kind of—well, run out in the city. As I understand it, in a big city like New York or Chicago you can be pretty and smart and capable and still not attract very much notice. So many smart and pretty and capable ones that you don't get anywhere. But in a small place like Redmoon, if you're anyways smart or pretty or capable—and I don't deny that Colinette is all three—why, you can go right to the top. For instance, in New York Colinette would probably daub away making magazine covers all her days. But here she can marry a rich man's son, ride in her own car and just lead the whole town. She always did lead the town even when she was a school girl."

"That's it exactly, ma!" exclaimed Susan. "Gram'ma, have you ever talked with Colinette about her life in New York, I mean outside of her work? Do you know if she had an affair of any sort with Neal Brackley. Has she ever mentioned Neal Brackley to you, or any of the Brackleys?"

"Yes, I asked her about the Brackleys that first night she came. I asked her about Neal, but as I remember, she didn't seem to know much about

any of the Brackleys, and nothin' at all about Neal. I don't think she's seen anything of 'em since she's been East. I think they sort of started her off and then when she could go it alone they sort of dropped her."

"I think that's it," said Mrs. Dunlap, "they dropped her and other folks dropped her, and so she's back here to upset our plans."

"It ain't like her, an' you know it ain't, Susan, to look out for her own interests ahead of other folkses, an' you know it too—you other Susan. Both you Susans ought to know it." Mrs. Gard was sticking stubbornly to her theory in spite of much evidence on the other side. "If she's doin' a wrong to Susan she's doin' it unconsciously—"

"Colinette Gard isn't in the habit of wandering around unconsciously," sneered the younger Susan, and her grandmother was obliged to admit—mentally—that Susan was right.

"I'm goin' to have it out with her at any rate," she promised, "and when I do I'll tell you what she says. Meanwhile, Susan, you brace up and tend to business, and when folks pitch on to you and harry you, grin and make believe you don't care—as half the women alive are doin' this day."

VIII

MRS. GARD went home in a solemn frame of mind. It was prayer meeting night, but she decided to give up prayer meeting in order to "have it out with Colinette." It was a heavy task for the poor woman. She did so love to see the beautiful, sober little person opposite her at the supper table; sober, and at times weary after a day in the studio (although Mrs. Gard could never quite understand why such light work could weary body), but always appreciative of everything done for her comfort.

When the two of them were alone, which did not happen as often as Mrs. Gard could wish, what joy it was to talk over their past experiences together. For they had seen a good deal of life in each others' company.

There were the days when Colinette, an alien, had come to dwell in the little brown house in a hostile village and had won her way to leadership through sheer force of character and genius. The Brackleys had taken her up and had put her in the way of earning enough to take her through art school in New York—oh, there were worlds of experiences to talk over. One, how-

ever, here under this very roof, borne in agony of spirit, with stubbornness on the part of both, and compromise at last, they seldom spoke of. It was painful to both alike and they had agreed there and then to let the truth of the matter be forgotten between, and save for the one brief allusion on grandmother's part that first night of Colinette's return, they had kept the agreement. If it should be necessary to mention it on the occasion of this most disagreeable interview which was about to take place, then, of course, Mrs. Gard would face the necessity as she had learned to face other necessities of life. She would lay the matter before the Lord, as was her wont, and then go forward, doing her duty as she was guided to see it, without fear and without favor.

Colinette had said on that first night of her return that her one great fear was that she might some day lose her grandmother's love. How could she know that the fear of losing her own bright, mysterious, unexplainable affection was the lion standing in the grandmother's path this very moment?

How far would Colinette allow her affairs to be meddled with without resenting the action, no matter whose hand did the meddling?

It was cruel that she, Grandmother Gard, should be the one appointed to set matters right.

Why couldn't they have settled their love troubles without her interference?

But there it was: Susan was the weaker—had always been the weaker, the one needing help and protection. In schooldays Colinette had been Susan's champion, now in the days of young love, Colinette had turned enemy, and made herself the one to be overcome. And who could cope with Colinette if not her beloved grandmother, backed by the knowledge that her cause was just?

"If the Lord is on your side who can prevail against you," quoted Grandmother Gard, and went home strengthened for the conflict.

But her courage was not to be put to the test that night. She had just coaxed the kitchen fire into a good blaze when Aunt Rinthy Pickens arrived, self invited to supper. A few moments later Dr. Snyder's car stopped in front of the house and Colinette ran in to announce that she was going up to Lake Jane with Gertie Calkins and the doctor. Away she went, and Mrs. Gard was left to an uneasy and at times an exasperating evening with Aunt Rinthy who, having heard the bell, had come with a determined purpose to discover the clapper.

What, she wanted to know, was all this talk about a quarrel between Susan and Colinette? Had Colinette said anything about it?

Mrs. Gard floundered between the Scylla of

lying and the Charybdis of giving away facts which it were better that Aunt Rinthy should not know. Colinette had said nothing about a quarrel.

She thanked goodness that Aunt Rinthy had not followed up her opening by asking if Susan had said anything about a quarrel.

Why had the Susan-Jeff wedding been postponed?

Mrs. Gard had not heard that it had been postponed—definitely. But it wouldn't be strange if it had, seeing that Susan was so rushed in the store.

Was Susan calculating to keep right on in business after she was married?

Mrs. Gard hadn't heard anything to the contrary.

Mrs. Pickens "presumed" that Colinette would whirl in and take up her share of the partnership again.

As often as possible Mrs. Gard led Aunt Rinthy away from the subject of Colinette vs. Susan. These respites were short. Mrs. Pickens had come for the purpose of finding out just how much Gram'ma Gard knew of the scandal, and of telling gram'ma all she herself knew.

She prefixed many of her statements with, "Helen says," or, "they say down at the shop." It was an anxious two hours for Mrs. Gard.

Anxious as well as enlightening. The case was worse than she had feared.

She kept Mrs. Pickens as long and as late as possible to prevent her going over to "pump" the Susans. Poor Susan! who was not well equipped for word dueling or for keeping secrets.

When at last Mrs. Pickens went home, Mrs. Gard hurried across the street to her daughter's house. She discovered a shadowy figure on the porch as she approached. It was her daughter.

"That you, ma? Oh, I thought it was Susan," she explained to her mother. "Come on in."

Her mother read her thought before her next inquiry of "What's the news?"

"No news, Susan; I ain't had a chance to talk to her at all. Rinthy stayed to supper, and Colinette is up to Lake Jane with Gertie Calkins and Doc. Snyder, so I ain't had a chance." Mrs. Gard's sigh was echoed by her daughter's.

"Come on in. I'm all alone. Susan went back to the store after supper. I was in hopes you had had your talk out and could tell me about it. So seldom a word can be said here without Elmer or Luther takin' it in." Of late Susan Dunlap's tone had taken on an unwonted bitterness when speaking of her husband or his son.

In fact, the Dunlap household had become an armed camp of two factions, in which two grown men warred against one small, bony, abused

woman. For Susan the younger took no part in the discussions. She merely slunk sullenly out of hearing as soon as possible after one began.

The two women sat down in the close dark room by the front window talking over the same dreary subject.

"I run over to warn you against Rinty," Mrs. Gard cautioned in an undertone. "You sure Elmer ain't skulkin' round upstairs somewhere, are you? You know his ways."

"I know well enough," replied Mrs. Dunlap. "But he ain't upstairs. Fact is, he ain't been home today. He's off sommers with Jeff Plummer. He didn't come home to dinner and his father found out that he ain't been to work at all today. His father is all wrought up about him. He's got now where his father can't do a thing with him. It does seem as if all our young-ones was tryin' to do all they can to keep us in hot water. They tell about the blessing of children, but there are times when I almost wish I'd never had one. This trouble of Susan's is drivin' us all distracted. Luther acts like a zany over it. One thing, if Waldo and Rinty would let him alone, he wouldn't take it so to heart. In fact, he wouldn't know much of anything about it. But they keep him posted.

“He says to me, ‘your girl had a chance to make something of herself, but she ain’t goin’ to be smart enough to swing it, I can see. Might have known that Bill Taylor’s kid would fall down at everything she undertakes, just as Bill did.’

“Well, now he’s finding out that his child can be a fizzle, as well as Bill Taylor’s poor Susan, who feels a good sight worse than he possibly can over this affair. And it’s something she can’t help, and he knows she can’t help it. But, my goodness, ma, you ought to hear what he says about poor dead Brother John! As if John is to blame for what his girl does any more’n Luther himself is to blame for Elmer goin’ wild the way he is for the last few months.”

Mrs. Gard stirred uneasily in her chair. “It does seem queer to me,” she said, “that Luther should kick up such a rumpus about the chance of Susan’s losin’ Jeff Plummer when he knows that Jeff is just about ruining Elmer with his bad example and all.”

“Yes—well, there’s no accounting for men,” sighed Mrs. Dunlap.

“As I was saying,” went on Mrs. Gard, “you must weigh every word you say to Rinthy. She’ll repeat everything to Helen and Helen will peddle it down to the milliner shop, and from there it

will be carried all over town. The quieter we keep this business the better it will be for both the girls."

"That's so," assented Mrs. Dunlap. "Dear me, it seems a pity—so much trouble over something that might have been avoided. Seems as if there was enough real trouble in this world—sickness and death and such things—without makin' each other trouble."

The two women sat silent a moment. A cricket twanged his monotonous song, and the mosquitoes "pinged" at the screened window in an effort to get into the dark, warm house.

"Yes, after all, this ain't what you might call a real trouble," said Mrs. Gard. "It will blow over and be forgotten in no time. I'm goin' to ask Colinette what she's up to. If she's just flirtin' with Jeff Plummer I'm goin' to make her stop it; if she's really in love with him—" She paused and Mrs. Dunlap held her breath for the end of her mother's sentence.

"Well?" she urged at last impatiently, "if she's really in love with him, then what?"

"Well, then the Lord help Susan!" finished Mrs. Gard solemnly, and Mrs. Dunlap heaved a sigh that was almost a groan.

Susan herself came a few moments later.

"What you two doing here in the dark?" she inquired, and her grandmother noticed an ex-

cited ring in her voice, a tone of hopefulness. She felt about for another chair and drew it up cosily between her relatives.

“Helen says that Colinette got a letter from France today. She and Helen just happened to walk down to the postoffice together. Helen told Gusta that Colinette acted too queer for anything after she read that letter. Gusta says she knows well enough who the letter was from, and that she knows what has brought Colinette here to spend the summer in Redmoon. She says the letter was from her brother Willie, and that Colinette is here because she knows that Willie will be home this summer. Do you believe that, gram’ma?”

The idea seemed to bring Susan so much happiness that Mrs. Gard encouraged it. “I shouldn’t wonder one bit,” she said, “and I hope it’s so. I’d rather see her married to Willie Klatz than anybody I know. He always was good and trustworthy, and now that he has climbed right up next to General Pershing himself in the army—why, who knows?”

Susan cackled gaily. It was good to hear her laugh like that once more. “He’ll be home before long now. Gusta got a letter a couple of weeks ago, and they were about ready to start them. She says she knows that Colinette’s letter was from him.”

Mrs. Gard went home in a greater maze than ever. She did not believe in the Willie Klatz theory which had been such a comfort to Susan; she did not believe that Colinette was in love with Jeff Plummer; she did not believe that Colinette would hurt Susan in the slightest degree if she realized that she was hurting her. In Mrs. Gard's mind the only solution to the mystery was that Colinette was doing a wrong without knowing it. When she was told in a kindly, straightforward way, she would keep out of Jeff Plummer's society, even if she had to go back to New York. He would not be apt to follow her there, and when she was gone he would return to his allegiance to Susan. How foolish it was for a whole family to "git riled up" over so simple a matter.

She "had it out with Colinette" early the next morning. It did not turn out as Mrs. Gard had dramatized it in her own mind. She had imagined talking to Colinette in the front room after dark, just as she and the two Susans had sat in a dark room and talked the matter over the night before. It is much easier to speak of intimate things, things of which you are ashamed, and of which the other person ought to be ashamed, in the dusk. She had seen—with her mind's eye—just how Colinette would deny any

intention of causing Susan heartaches; she could hear her reiterate the fact that she loved Susan better than anybody else in the world except, of course, her grandmother; could hear her solemn promise. And when once Colinette promised, the matter was settled, for Colinette kept her promises always.

In place of this desirable sequence of events, the interview took place in the garish light of morning. Colinette sat with her slender hands clasped about her knees as she listened to her grandmother's bluntly-put accusation. She was pale, and her lashes—always so much darker than her hair—lay like dusky shadows on her cheeks. When at last her grandmother paused for a reply she seemed to have nothing to say—just sat guiltily, unhappily silent, and her grandmother went on:

“What makes you act so, Colinette, comin’ home here and jerkin’ Susan’s feller right out from under her nose the way they say you have? You’ve been in the city where there must have been lots of men if you’d wanted to marry. But here’s poor Susan with her one beau, and they just about ready to step off, and along you come an’ put a damper on the proceedings and spoil everything.”

She paused, scanning Colinette’s face with an

anxious eye, waiting for her to begin her defense, but Colinette maintained her silence.

“Seems to me that if you think as much of your Cousin Susan as you always claim you do, you’d let Jeff Plummer alone even if you was dead in love with him—just dead in love—you’d be fair enough to step out of the way an’ let Susan have him as long as she got him first and everything was settled between ’em.”

Again she waited, searching the lovely, drooping face.

“But, somehow, you seemed to have changed since you been away.”

“I have,” admitted Colinette softly, “I have changed. I’ve—gone back to that old motto of mine—my first one, you remember: ‘If you want a thing, go after it!’ ”

“Oh me, oh my!” groaned Mrs. Gard, “then it’s all so—that you want Jeff Plummer—really want him for yourself! Well I can’t understand it at all! Can’t understand why all the girls—and you, too—want that critter! He ain’t so handsome, and he’s dumb as an oyster. You used to think so yourself, Colinette, when you lived here. Still, I can remember when I was a girl there was a feller named Sidney Dish, who come into our neighborhood without pallet or scrip, an’ the girls all fit over him. He was bow-legged an’ rabbit-mouthed, but he could make

even the preacher laugh at his antics, and he played the fiddle like a he-angel. I can remember settin' an' listening to him play—"

"Were you in love with him, too, grandmother?"

"I don't know but I was, kindah—in a way."

"What made you love him?"

"Well, that's just what I was sayin'—what? I can't tell. But I know this much: If my sister or my cousin had been engaged to Sidney Dish, I'd a felt it was pretty dishonest for me to step in and take him away even if I could have done it."

"Yes—because—that was your motto even then, wasn't it, grandmother—'Honesty is the Best Policy?' And you were working under that banner, which is—so different from mine—"

Mrs. Gard got out of the patent rocker in which she had been sitting. She was about to deal the body blow; about to utter the irrevocable lie—to break Colinette's heart, and, incidentally, her own. She felt that she could give it more force standing.

"Well, if you persist in bein' absolutely selfish; in havin' your own way, no matter who suffers; if you persist in goin' after the thing you want even if your road to it lies right across poor Susan's heart—yes, an' mine too—why—" she paused, and her face wrinkled with pain, her eyes

glittered with suffering like the eyes of a trapped animal, "you won't be welcome here in your own home any longer."

She had known the declaration would have its effect—she had meant that it should—but not such a terrible effect. With a little moaning cry Colinette let her head fall forward upon her hands.

"It has come! It has come—what I have always dreaded! Oh, grandmother, why didn't you keep out of it? Why did you mix up in it?"

Her grandmother was beside her instantly, her old hands trembling, her voice husky with emotion.

"There, there, dearie, don't take on so. You'll kill gram'ma! Now you just turn round and be a good girl an' everything will be all right. You know how to be a good girl. You know well enough this business is harder on me than it is on you. All you got to do is to turn face about an' be good an' save all this misery— For goodness sake, Colinette, wipe off your face an' stand up! Aunt Rinthy is comin' I can see her up the road on our side!"

"You are punishing me, grandmother, and telling me, as good mothers always tell their children that it hurts them more than it does the children, but you are wrong; it doesn't hurt you as it does

me! And isn't it queer—like a bad dream—because, don't you remember, this all happened once before—right here in this room—”

“She's turnin' in! Colinette, promise me to give up this wickedness of yours—quick, before she gits here!”

“I can't, grandmother; I shall go on just as I have begun. It's too late to give up.”

“Oh me, oh my, what shall I do!” wailed Mrs. Gard.

“And I must tell you, grandmother, that if I had it all to do over again I should do just the same— But I will go away. I won't stay here with you when you don't want me—”

“Colinette, I've prayed over this matter and prayed earnestly, but for some good reason that I ain't big enough to see, the Lord ain't seen fit to give me any light—not yet. But He will, I'm sure of that. He ain't never failed me yet. But I want you to pray. I give you a week to—to—take it to the Lord in prayer. Will you?”

Colinette nodded solemnly, and as Aunt Rinthy was at the door, caught up her hat and disappeared, while grandmother went to let in the caller.

IX

IF the morning had been bitter to Colinette it had been no less so to Susan Dunlap. She was eager to tell Jeff of Colinette's letter from Willie Klatz. She was sure now that it was from Willie, as sure as was Willie's sister.

She did not go to her own work, but instead sauntered about the Plummer grain elevator until she caught sight of Jeff coming to his daily task in his usual late and lazy manner.

"Hullo," he greeted, "what are you doing here at this time of day?"

She smiled at him. "Can't I be going to work at ten o'clock as well as you?"

"I suppose you can. Little different, though; your business is your own; mine is the old man's."

"Mine is only half my own."

"Well, you've got a darned nice partner, I'll say you have."

She regarded him angrily, "I wish you didn't think so."

"But I do think so, and what can you do about it?"

"Oh nothing, I suppose. But there is someone else who may not be as helpless in this matter as I am."

"Who is that? Goin' to have your stepfather lick me because I think your Cousin Colinette is a pretty girl,"

"Oh no; I don't think he would trouble, but her lover may when he gets back."

"Who are you talking about, Miss Dunlap?"

"Lieutenant Klatz."

"Villie— Oh Lord! I've got a picture of little Colinette taking up with Dutch Willie Klatz!"

"She gets letters from him."

"I don't believe it."

"I happen to know it, Mr. Plummer. I saw one, and a love-letter at that—well, anyhow Gusta says it was a love-letter. I won't lie, I didn't see the letter myself—"

"No, I bet you didn't. But don't hesitate to say you did. When a woman gets jealous she'll say anything."

"Oh, Jeff. I didn't waylay you this morning to have a fight. Let's quit quarreling and be happy as we were before—"

"Well, I'm pretty sick of these blowouts myself—pretty sick of 'em; I told you when we first began to go together that you couldn't keep me in a milliner's bandbox, and I tell you so again. You've been acting like a—ninny ever since she came home."

"Well, let's stop our bickering, Jeff. I'm willing to own that I've been jealous, but it's because

—why, Jeff, you know it's because I love you! Walk down this back street with me a little way and let's talk it over—”

“I can't; I've got to open the office.”

“You didn't used to be so particular.”

“Particular! Good governor, it's after ten o'clock. Do you think it would be very smart for a business man to be caught mooning around the back street at this time in the forenoon?”

“I think nobody would find fault if he were with the girl he is going to marry.”

But Jeff made no move to accept her invitation.

“When did this wonderful letter come?” he asked sullenly.

“Yesterday.”

“How did you come to know what was in it and who it was from; did she show it to you?”

Susan was at the end of her endurance. “What difference does it make to you, or to me, what was in her letter? If you want to know so badly, Jeff, you had better ask her.”

“Oh, I can guess without seeing the letter. I think that letter was all in your eye.”

“You mean that I lied about her getting a letter from France?”

“Take it as you please.” He nonchalantly lighted a cigarette. Susan's eyes were blazing. Her cheeks were so red they seemed about to burst.

"Do you mean to accuse me of lying?"

"Take it as you please."

"You don't care very much for me any more, do you, Jeff?" He was carefully drawing on his light and did not answer.

"Do you?" she persisted.

"Oh rats! Chuck this rough work! I've got to go in and open up or the old man will be along and give me gowdy."

"Answer me first!"

"How can a fellow care for a girl who nags him all the time?"

"Then you own up that you don't care?"

"Say, Sue, there's a man coming down the street; you better beat it. If you ain't got any shame about chewin' the rag out here on Main Street, why I have. He'll think we're already married."

"Answer me!"

"I've forgotten what you asked."

"Jeff Plummer, your memory is too far gone for a girl to trust her life's happiness in your hands. Here's your ring; I'm through with you for good and all. Take it and give it to Colinette Gard!" She tore the ring from her finger and threw it upon the pavement.

"Gosh, but you're high and mighty!" he blustered. "You oughta git a job in some moving picture studio—tragedy queen, an' all that. Who

you been studying with?" But he hurried to gather up the ring before the man who was approaching should tread upon it. He stood looking after Susan for one wrathful moment, then he laughed insultingly and thrust the key into the office door.

"Let her sulk!" he snarled. "She'll come to a whistle if I should happen to want her. Meanwhile—by George, I'm free!"

Susan did not go to the shop. In her rage and despair her instinct led her towards home and seclusion. She could never go to the millinery store again; never endure the prying eyes, the secretly quacking tongues of that roomful of girls. How they would gloat over her defeat! The moment she stepped into the door they would notice that her ring was gone. In fact, she believed they had been watching for its disappearance ever since the firemen's dance. Well, it was gone now, and gone for good, but oh, the blackness of the world, and the rage and despair in her heart! A pounding pain in her head made her dizzy, made her sway and reel as she walked the uneven ties of the railroad track on her way to Brown Street and mother and everlasting obscurity. Perhaps she was going to die. She hoped that she was. A picture immediately flashed upon her inner vision: The Dunlap parlor decorously darkened, the long black casket

(it would have to be long and large and wide and deep to hold her—great, overgrown, awkward thing that she was) standing in front of the western window; Gram'ma Gard with tear-swollen eyes—oh yes, Gram'ma Gard would mourn and mourn sincerely—sitting beside her mother; the other friends and neighbors crowding the rooms— Would Jeff Plummer be there? Would his eyes be red with crying? Did a man cry when his sweetheart died? Would he come at all?— Who was that standing on the Pettingill corner?

Colinette Gard! Oh, why must she meet Colinette Gard on this of all mornings?

And again, why not? It was just the time to meet Colinette Gard; to accuse her; to let her know what she had done; to give her fair warning that she, Susan Dunlap, was through with her forever!

Colinette came to meet her. Susan glared at her with a great hatred. How white she was, how unhappy-looking! Well, even she might have a conscience, and might be suffering in consequence.

“Susan,” said Colinette softly.

Susan sneered. “Oh you needn't ‘Susan’ me, now or ever any more! I know you now—through and through, and I can't see how Uncle John could have been the father of such a two-faced, sneaking, lying little cheat! You hear

what I say? I never want you to speak to me again—never again! I don't care if you are my cousin. I don't care if you were my sister, I hate you, and I always shall hate you!"

"Oh, Susan—and I am in such deep trouble—"

"Oh are you? Well then you will know how to pity other folks who are in trouble. Me, for instance; I am in trouble and you are the cause of it, as you know very well. But from now on we are through—you and I. I am as much through with you as I am with Jeff Plummer, and how much that is you will find out when you see him next, I don't doubt."

Colinette pressed the back of one slender hand against her lips, as was her wont under strong excitement

"You—you are through with Jeff Plummer? You have—broken your engagement?"

"Oh yes. Aren't you glad? There is nothing to hinder your having him now. You won't have to daub pictures for a living any more; you can ride around in the Plummer car and be a lady. But mind you keep away from me—now and always! This is the last time I shall ever speak to you!"

"Susan, grandmother has turned me out. She doesn't want me any more—"

"I don't blame her. She has found out what you are—"

"Oh, Susan, don't hate me so! I am not as bad as you think—"

But Susan turned and went her way without another word.

That night Dr. Merton's little black car stood in front of the Dunlap house, and the word went forth that Susan Dunlap was very ill. Colinette, on her week's probation, with her grandmother went to the door, but was refused admittance. Later Mrs. Gard went over alone. Her daughter met her at the door.

"Susan is an awful sick girl, ma," she whispered. "She don't want to see anybody, and Dr. Merton says we must humor her. Aunt Rinthy has been here already, and has gone away as mad as a hatter because I wouldn't let her in."

"But how you goin' to manage alone?" bemoaned Mrs. Gard.

"Oh I don't know; I s'pose it'll work out somehow," Mrs. Dunlap groaned in return. "If only poor Susan gits well I'm willin' to work my fingers to the bone!"

"Susan's goin' to come out all right," her mother assured her. "You keep your faith bright, and make Elmer and Luther come to my house to eat. Cast your burden on the Lord and He will carry you through." But Mrs. Gard's own faith and courage were wavering as she crossed the road to her own house.

For the space of ten days Susan lay in her darkened bedroom seeing no one but her mother and the doctor. At the end of that time her grandmother was allowed to come in and talk with her a few moments, and although that lady said little, somehow her presence, and the sense of the world forsaken so long, awoke in Susan a poignant desire to "hear the worst." But she was forbidden to talk, and her grandmother went away without telling her anything save that "the business was goin' on just splendid, and she mustn't fret, but just turn her attention to gittin' well as fast as she could."

After her grandmother had gone Susan regretted that she had not questioned her. Colinette had said that her grandmother had turned her out of her door; where was she, then? She could not sleep in her studio. Perhaps she was already married—to Jeff. How long did it take to get a marriage license?

The more she allowed her mind to linger on the questions so rigorously shut out during the days past, the more she determined that the time had now come to face the music, no matter how terrible the air.

She reached for the little bell, placed beside her bed for that purpose, and summoned her mother. She heard the eager, stumbling steps of the poor, overworn little woman coming up the stairs.

How many times those aching feet had climbed those stairs during the days she had been shut up here. And why? Because she, Susan, had chosen to make a fool of herself! Why hadn't she been sport enough to bear her own sorrows quietly instead of loading them off upon her already enslaved mother; been brave enough to bear them by herself as—yes, she must acknowledge it—as the detested Colinette would have borne them in her place?

When her mother appeared, she was sitting up in bed. Mrs. Dunlap cried out in a sort of delighted fright.

"Why, Susan, lie down! What you doin', settin' up this way? Doctor said—"

Susan sank back weakly. "I—guess I'm sort of hungry."

"You dear child!" cried her mother delighted, "I'll run over to gram'ma's and phone to doctor and ask him if I dare give you something, and what will be best—"

"No, ma," Susan put out a hand and held her mother weakly, "I'm—in no hurry. I've waited so long I can wait a few minutes longer. Sit down and—tell me a few things."

Her mother drew up a chair, and Susan imagined she read reluctance and fear in the tired face.

"She thinks I'm going to ask about—him, and that what she would be obliged to tell me would

make me bad again," she decided. "I believe I could hear anything—the very worst—without a tremor. Poor ma! She doesn't know that when I heaved that ring at him there on Main Street I gave up completely. I quit for good right then and there. And now I'm going to brace up and take my share of the load—yes, and a little more, if I can make up for this horrid spell. Poor ma, how yellow and black and drawn around the mouth she looks!

"You've had an awful hard pull of it, haven't you, ma?"

"No, dear, not so hard only that I was so worried about you. You see, I ain't had anything to do except to take care of you, talk to callers and let the doctor in and out."

"Who has been doing the housework?"

"Well, gram'ma made Luther eat over to her house."

"And Elmer?"

"Elmer went a hunting over to Dahinda marsh the very day after you was taken sick, and he ain't been home since. It's made it a good deal easier for me."

So Elmer had gone to the big marsh hunting. That meant that Jeff Plummer had gone too. Elmer never went to Dahinda without Jeff.

She forced herself to ask, "Did Jeff Plummer go with him?"

"Yes." It was strange how much dislike could be put into a word of three letters. Susan understood that her mother laid all her trouble, all her fright and fatigue at Jeff's door.

"You say there have been lots of callers here to ask after me?"

Her mother brightened. "Oh, everybody in town most. Doc. Merton's wife and Lila, and Gertie Calkins twice, and Lizzie Smith and her mother—"

"And who else?"

"Well, Aunt Rinthy has been here morning noon and night, and always bound to git upstairs. I've had the awfulest time keepin' her down."

"I'll bet you have. I'm glad you kept her down; I couldn't have stood Aunt Rinthy, ma."

"And Uncle Waldo has been about as bad. Ask questions, and ask questions, till a body is about crazy!"

"Poor ma. Well who else?"

"The Klatzes have been here every day. They've been awful good. Mrs. Klatz has done all my baking and washing. Gusta has been almost as bad as Aunt Rinthy about wantin' to get up here to see you. She says she has a whole lot to tell you as soon as you are strong enough to hear it."

"I wonder what it can be," said Susan dreamily.

"I guess I could tell you the most of it," laughed Mrs. Dunlap. "Willie is coming next week. He is in New York now. The Klatzes are all excitement over it."

Mrs. Dunlap hesitated, looked at her daughter yearningly, and then said, "gram'ma's got something to tell you when you are a little better—something about Colinette and Willie Klatz."

"Colinette and Willie?"

"Yes. We were all mistaken about her bein' in love with Jeff Plummer; she don't care a fig for Jeff Plummer and never has. She and gram'ma have had a good long talk and—"

"And of course gram'ma has forgiven her and taken her back."

"Why yes, what else could gram'ma do? After she had promised never to have anything more to say to Jeff—but I'll let gram'ma tell you the whole story herself."

Susan's lip curled. "Oh gram'ma needn't; I'd rather she just kept still about the whole business. I don't want anybody ever to talk to me about Jeff Plummer or Colinette Gard or Willie Klatz; I'm through with the whole bunch. All I want now is to get well and to get back to work."

"You mustn't worry about the store. Everything is just booming there, Gusta tells me. Colinette whirled right in and waited on trade ever

since you've been away. Gusta says Colinette could sell a hat to a stone image."

"Yes—well, you go and get me something to eat, please, ma; an egg, or something strengthening. It's a shame the way you've had to travel up and downstairs. But I'll pay you back, ma. I shan't have anything to do now but to pay you back because—I'm not going to be married now, you know."

"Oh pshaw! You and Jeff will patch up your quarrel now. When he comes back from the marsh he'll ask your forgiveness and everything will be just as it was before."

Susan shook her head. "Never, ma. I wouldn't marry Jeff Plummer now if he should beg me to on his bended knees!"

"Well, well, don't talk now, Susan, and don't think. Just keep quiet and git strong. Everything will look different to you when you begin to git round again."

"Maybe. But see here, ma, I want you to tell gram'ma that I don't want her to say one word to me now or ever about what passed between her and Colinette. It doesn't make any difference to me now one way or the other. It has all come out just as I said it would, and I don't care to hear the details. You tell gram'ma I said so."

"All right, dear. Now you lie still and I'll be up in no time with a nice egg, a creamy piece of

toast, and some of the jell that I hid away from Elmer in the meal-crock."

Susan obeyed her mother in the matter of lying still, but her thoughts flew from one subject to another with unruly rapidity. The strange part was that they did not dwell so much on Jeff Plummer as upon the returning soldier Willie Klatz. She should never forgive Jeff, but her resentment towards Colinette was already fading into a mere cold indifference, tinged now and then with a spirit of revenge.

All through his boyish days Willie Klatz had adored her. Through all her scorn and neglect of him he had remained her loyal knight. He had been nobody in those days; now he was returning a be-medaled hero for whom Redmoon was waiting to hand out welcoming banners. She wondered if she might not still hold some place in Willie's thoughts; might not—in a slighter measure, of course—visit some of the aching jealousy upon Colinette which Colinette had been the cause of her feeling. Colinette had succeeded where Jeff Plummer was concerned even as she, Susan, had predicted that she would. It might have been through ignorance that Colinette had caused her unhappiness, but the fact remained that she had caused it, and that now she turned eagerly to greet the soldier who, it appeared, had been her lover all the time.

What had turned Willie Klatz's thoughts to Colinette so completely if not the news of Susan's engagement to Jeff Plummer? And, of course, if on his return Willie had found that engagement still existing—but now that she was again free—

Susan lay and counted her ten thin fingers over and over and thought of all these things while she waited for her mother to bring up the toast.

X

SUSAN dreaded her return to the store, her first meeting with Colinette, the return of Elmer with his sneers and knowing innuendoes, the unkind speeches of her disappointed stepfather, but more than all she dreaded Aunt Rinthy Pickens and her family. If only she could avoid the meeting with Aunt Rinthy or Helen for a year or two, or, at least until she was strong enough not "to blubber at every hint"—but, of course, that was impossible. Aunt Rinthy had been bombarding her door daily and had it not been for the fact that Colinette and Grandmother Gard had both been excluded from the sick room she would have been in long ago.

But luck favored Susan in the matter of holding of her inquisitive relatives. The day before Susan came downstairs for the first time Mrs. Pickens tucked her daughter Helen under her arm and flew away to Milltown to shop. Helen was to be clothed for the Calkins wedding.

The meeting with Colinette was not, after all, unpleasant in the least. In fact it took place so suddenly that Susan hardly realized until after it was over. Colinette did not ask to be admitted and thus gave her cousin time to marshall all her

resentful feelings. She came without any announcement whatever. Just a quick step on the stair—the sound of which had always been welcome in the old days—and two warm arms about Susan's neck.

“Well, Sus, I'm glad to see you up again. You are awfully good looking now. It is becoming to you—this thinness. I mustn't stay! Aunt Susan and grandmother don't know I'm up here; they'd whip me out if they did. But—Willie Klatz comes home on the six o'clock tomorrow night, and the town is turning itself inside out to welcome him. You ought to see the decorations. You must see them. Lila Merton wants you and me to go with her and her father to see the parade. Her mother can't go, and Lila says there will be a perfectly lovely back seat in the car which we can have all to ourselves. We can wrap you up, and, really, I believe it will do you good.”

It was like Colinette to ignore all past troubles, to neither ask nor offer forgiveness for words spoken or for deeds done. And of course that was the easier way.

In view of Colinette's tenderness, Susan experienced a pang of contrition at the revengeful plan in her own mind. But she must be inexorable. She must remember those tortures through which she had passed unsupported and alone.

"It's going to be great fun," Colinette went on to say, "Willie doesn't know a word about the celebration which Redmoon has already to avalanche upon him. He'll be scared to death."

From the back seat of Dr. Merton's car Susan looked forth with wonderment at the streaming banners, the crowds, the motor cars all banked together about the station to welcome plain Willie Klatz. Her heart beat a little quicker at her first glimpse of him, standing smiling on the car step before he was caught up by reaching hands and borne to the car which had been awaiting him. This was maneuvered into its place next the band wagon and sailed slowly toward Main Street at the head of the long procession while the crowd cheered, yelled, threw up caps, and otherwise signified its pleasure and pride in the return of a hero.

Colinette, leaning from her place beside Susan, clapped her hands wildly. Her cheeks were pinker than Susan had ever seen them before; her hair made a golden frame for her vivid face.

Susan sank back into her dark corner, experiencing the most poignant moment of unhappiness of all this unhappy period. What was she, the discarded sweetheart, the jibe and joke of Redmoon, to imagine she could retain any place in the thoughts of this new, strange Willie Klatz!

This Lieutenant Klatz was as different from Uncle Waldo Pickens's slouching, good-hearted young hired man—as different as she herself was different from Colinette.

"He wasn't so bewildered after all, was he?" triumphed Colinette. "The scamp! He has grown used to the throwing up of caps and the hurrahing of crowds. He'll be so conceited there'll be no getting along with him."

Susan did not reply. This new-found conceit of Willie Klatz's was Colinette's problem—not hers, but she realized that Jeff Plummer had been wrong in thinking that Colinette would be obliged to stoop to Willie Klatz.

Susan was hurt by the fact that Willie did not come to see her the day after his arrival. There had been a time when he would have made that his first errand.

She saw him walking up the street with Colinette. They sauntered slowly along, seemingly much engrossed in some matter of deep interest. Once Willie gazed across at the Dunlap house and Susan was sure that he would stop on his way home. But he did not, and later, sitting by the kitchen window, she saw him, his mother and Colinette on the Klatzes back porch still talking, talking.

Susan had been placidly helping her mother to get supper, and now her stepfather came home

from work. He passed through the kitchen to hang his coat and hat in the "shed-room" where he always kept them.

"I saw Plummer on the street as I came through town just now," he began.

Susan always braced herself to hear that name whenever Dunlap appeared. He took especial delight in keeping it fresh in her thoughts.

"He says Jeff and our young hopeful will be home day after tomorrow. High time, I think. Been gone over two weeks."

"Yes," assented Mrs. Dunlap, scurrying from stove to table and from table to pantry, putting the last touches to the evening meal. Luther went out to the washbench in the back room and made himself ready for supper before he unloaded the remaining items of news gathered on his homeward way.

"Walked up with Waldo just now. He said he heard that Willie Klatz had hired a car for a month. Goin' to take some party out on a automobile trip. Waldo wanted to know if any of our folks was goin'. I says, 'well now no; not that anybody knows of.' Says I, 'Elmer is the only one of our folks who would be likely to go, and he ain't in from his last trip yet.' I'd sooner think it was some of the down town crowd—Doc. Merton's girl or Lizzie Smith. Some of that outfit. Waldo says Willie was trainin' round

down town with all the swells, now that he's made a hit as a soldier he's right up in G."

"Come, Susan," coaxed her mother, "here's some of your favorite stew fixed the way you like it."

But Susan's interest in stew was not marked.

"You'll have to eat if you expect to git your strength," commented Dunlap. "And I should think you'd want to git your strength and git back to business. I shouldn't want to leave the business in John Gard's girl's hands any longer'n I was obliged to—right through the heft of the season too."

Susan left the table presently, and wandered into the living room. From the open front door she saw Grandmother Gard and Colinette out in their front yard talking, talking— Why was Colinette always talking today? She had seemed to be arguing with Willie, with Mrs. Klatz, and now with her grandmother. Susan could see even at that distance that Colinette was engaged in a struggle of some sort with "gram'ma." Well, "gram'ma" might as well give up first as last; Colinette would triumph in the end.

Mrs. Gard went up her own steps and Colinette came straight across the street and up the Dunlap steps.

"Well, Sue."

"Hello, Colinette."

"How is the sick girl today?"

"Nicely, thank you." Susan's tone was coldly formal.

"Where are the folks?"

"Eating supper in the kitchen."

"Why aren't you eating supper with them?"

"She just hasn't any appetite at all," called Mrs. Dunlap.

"She never can expect to git anywhere if she don't eat," announced Dunlap. "Guess she sort a likes lazin' round home, so she means to keep weak as long as she can."

Susan smiled in a sickly manner. She was thinking of next day after tomorrow when Elmer and Jeff Plummer and Helen and Aunt Rinthy would all be home again and she would have to face the music—the deadly music of comment and pleasantry. She was quite certain that Jeff would approach her again, after making certain that Colinette would have none of him—when he beheld with his own eyes her infatuation for Willie Klatz.

Susan was sure that if she wished to reinstate Jeff as her lover it could be done. But back of her lifelong infatuation for him burned a fierce resentment amounting almost to hatred. However, this might wear away in time, and then would she allow herself to be cajoled back to the slavery which she had escaped? He had warned

her that in taking him she must leave her mother behind, and through all the days of her illness and humiliation had loomed the comforting thought that now, at least, there was no one to dictate as to how much she was to love and cling to her mother.

"I think that Susan would rather be well," said Colinette, "but she never will be if she stays shut up in this house. So grandmother and I have hired a car and a driver to take her out for a trip and a change. Isn't that lovely, Susan?"

It was Colinette's way to take Susan's consent for granted. It was settled, the car and the driver were hired—too late for objections.

But Susan had no idea of objecting. "How long would we be gone?" she asked eagerly, seeing nothing in the arrangement beyond a short reprieve from Aunt Rinthy, Helen and Gertie Calkins.

"Until you get your roses back, and your appetite," Colinette promised her.

It was Luther who objected. "Oh pshaw! that's all foolishness. If she stays right to home and takes that tonic the doctor left for her she'll be all right in time. And besides, where did you an' Mother Gard git so much money that you can hire cars an' drivers, an' all?"

"Too late to think about that part, because the car and driver are already hired," said Colinette.

"So, Sue, you must get ready right away. We must start tomorrow morning early." Colinette swept Luther and his objections from her path as she would have swept any little insignificant obstacle. "You must take all the warm wraps you have, because we shall drive late at night part of the time, and you might be cold."

Susan made a motion as if to go upstairs at once to begin her preparations.

Luther twirled his neck. "You an' Mother Gard are taking pretty ignorant chances. How do you know what a strange chauffeur will let you in for in the way of accidents? Why, my land! don't you know that an automobile will play off more tricks than a balky horse ever thought of? An' you load of women off summers in the country with a driver that don't know his business—nice expense you'd run into, say nothing of danger. But that's just like Mother Gard. Tell you what you can do, though; Elmer's comin' home day after tomorrow, you can put off startin' till he gets here an' take him along—"

"But we are quite sure of our driver, Uncle Luther. It is Willie Klatz, who knows a motor from the headlight to the spare tire behind. Why, Willie drove a tank in France for a while. Willie can take care of us."

"Willie? Humph! I heard down town that

he'd hired a car to take a party off some'rs. I should think he'd want—"

"Yes, we have hired Willie."

"I should think, now that he's just got home, he'd want to stay and visit his own folks for a spell."

"I presume he would be glad to, but like all returning soldiers, Willie must pick up any old job which happens to come his way. Grandmother had given him a job and he has no choice."

Susan had settled back with a disappointed look upon her face. She was not sure she wished to be a spectator to Colinette's latest love drama. She was tired of love stories. In books they ended happily, in real life, never. There, the girl lost her sweetheart, or got him, and was sorry afterwards.

"I've come over to help you pack," urged Colinette, and led her cousin away up stairs. She made Susan sit down in the least uncomfortable chair in the room. Then she shut the door securely and sat down herself upon the bedside.

"I have a scheme," she confided, in the old way which Susan knew so well.

"You are not looking just right yourself," ventured Susan, and her observation seemed to please Colinette.

"I've been having war with grandmother, and

a fight with grandmother is always wearing to me; you know that, Sue."

"What's the matter now?" inquired Susan languidly.

"She won't do what I think best."

"You haven't trained her as you should." Collette ignored the not too latent sarcasm.

"She won't go on this expedition."

"But you said downstairs—"

"I know, but all the same, grandmother absolutely refuses to go with us. I do so want her to go. It would do her a world of good. And she and your mother would have such a good time together—"

"My mother! What are you getting at, Collette? My mother isn't—"

"Yes she is, Sue, and that is what I want to talk to you about. Sue, your mother is just worn out—hush, hush, now! Don't begin that; brace up and listen to my plan. What with your being sick, and that everlasting nagging old Luther Dunlap and Elmer to wait on, she is just ready to collapse. She needs a rest—"

"Oh I know it!" groaned Susan. "Poor little ma! Poor tired little ma! But you needn't think for a minute that pa will let her go on a trip, even if she dies of tiredness."

"He wouldn't if he knew, of course, and she wouldn't if she knew, but they do not know."

"He'll send Elmer instead."

"Not in my bus," murmured Colinette. "But grandmother has rather spoiled the arrangement by refusing to go with us. We should have been such a jolly party with her along—not a care as to what we were leaving behind. Now, all through the weeks I shall be wondering if she is well, and happy, and not too lonely—"

"Weeks! How long do you expect to be gone?"

Colinette explained by going right on with what she had said to her grandmother.

"I said, 'grandmother, we shall be gone almost all of the rest of the summer.' We shall not only be gone, but we shall be good and gone. No one shall know where we are. We shall be lost, completely, astonishingly, mysteriously. We shall be obliged to be, or Uncle Luther will command Aunt Susan to return to slavery, and Aunt Susan will obey."

"But how are you going to persuade pa to—"

"Leave everything to me, Susan, and remember this: It is not on account of your health at all that I have undertaken to captain this expedition—in time you would have got well by yourself—but unless we scheme a rest for your mother she isn't going to stand it long—"

"Oh, poor ma!" wailed Susan again. "I know you are right about ma—"

“Now the question is, are you willing to back me in—well—and this is the rock that grandmother split on—a little bit of deceit in order to get your mother away? Now are you? You see grandmother is still marching under her old banner—perfect honesty. But we can’t pry Aunt Susan loose along that line, and I am using my own methods—just for this occasion, you understand. And what I want to know is, will you back me?”

A stubborn look came into Susan’s face. “I’ll back you to the limit, Colinette! I’ll lie and cheat and swear—”

“You won’t have to go to such extremes.”

“What shall I have to do, then? Tell me, and I’ll do it no matter what it is.”

“Just keep perfectly quiet and let me do the lying and cheating and so on. You know, I am really so much better fitted for that sort of thing than you are. Just you keep still. Don’t call out, ‘why, Colinette, I thought you said—’ when strange things happen. Take everything for granted. If the moon falls out of the sky and bowls along in front of the car, don’t take any notice of it or make any comments. Just think, ‘Oh well, this isn’t my job; my job is to keep mum and enjoy myself; my work is to rest and to play the game, so that my mother may rest too.’ ”

“That’s easy, I’m sure. But I don’t see how you are going to—”

“Now there you go, Sue. Remember, if the moon tumbles out of the sky you are to keep still.”

XI

IT seemed almost a miracle to Susan that the expedition should get under way without even Uncle Waldo Pickens present to see the start, but so it happened. It was early in the morning that Willie swung up to Mrs. Gard's door in the comprehensive touring car into which he proceeded dextrously to pack the rolls of blankets, rugs, baskets and baggage of all sorts awaiting him on the little slanting porch. His mother and sister came with mysterious little offerings tissued and tied and hastily tucked in as surprises for the voyagers. He smiled eagerly at Susan when she appeared, and handed her into the back seat, "back where you can loll and be comfy," he told her.

"Yes, the old and invalided must take the back seat," she grumbled.

"You bet. Colinette and I are the tough ones; we'll sit in front and take the dust."

Mrs. Dunlap came hurrying with another shawl to tuck about Susan. She hardly knew whether this jaunt was going to be good for Susan or bad.

"When shall we begin to look for you back?"

she asked, reaching up to straighten Susan's veil, and tuck it down into her coat collar.

"We may be back tonight," warned Willie. "This old boat may go to pieces on the rocks."

Mrs. Gard was carefully locking her doors. Luther Dunlap appeared buttoning his vest, his hair wild from a recent pillow. He had nearly been up too late to see the start.

"You'd better plan to git back Thursday," he advised. "Which way you headin' this mornin'?"

"Due East," Willie informed him.

"Then you'll pass through Green Springs about three this afternoon, and you'll pull into Little Clyde some time tomorrow. When you git to Little Clyde, drop a card so we'll know where you are."

"What do you want to know for?" asked Willie laughing.

"Why, we might want to send you word of some kind."

Colinette came and climbed into the front seat. "We sha'n't send many cards," she warned. "We're going out on purpose to get lost—lost to everybody."

Willie got Mrs. Gard comfortably settled beside Susan in the back.

"Now, girls, don't you worry about the shop," advised Gusta, "everything is going smooth and

fine there. You just forget millinery and hats and things and have a good time."

"Who you calculatin' to have tend your chickens?" demanded Luther of Mrs. Gard.

"Elmer will be home tomorrow, won't he? You tell him I left word for him to tend the chickens," and Willie murmured in an aside to his seatmate, "poor chickens!"

"We'll attend to the chickens," promised Mrs. Klatz, and everybody said good-by, and the car swept down the hill, around the corners and through the still quiescent Main Street.

They were off. The morning air was like wine to Susan, and the sense of getting over space rapidly—escaping—was exhilarating. The warm, quiet body of her grandmother there on the seat beside her was comfortable and reassuring but—where was ma? Colinette had announced that the expedition was to be taken on her account and for her benefit, yet she was left behind, straining loving eyes after them, or by this time back in the stuffy kitchen busy with the Dunlap breakfast.

The autoists breakfasted beside a running stream, lunched at a spring fifty miles farther east, and put up for the night at Greenfield. From here they proceeded at a leisurely rate of speed to Little Clyde, which they reached while the day was still new. Here Willie saw them

comfortably established at a hotel while he took the car to a garage for necessary supplies and repairs.

It must be something very serious which needed attention, Susan decided, for the hours went by and Willie did not return. She heard Colinette ask a maid to direct her to the telegraph office. She wondered if the car was wrecked beyond repair and if Willie had gone for another, but remembering her promise, she asked no questions.

They passed the second night at Little Clyde and after breakfast Willie took them out walking to see some of the pretty houses of the pleasant little city. Colinette walked with her grandmother, and they talked together earnestly. Willie and Susan paced slowly along saying little or nothing to each other.

Willie was indeed very much changed. It was amazing what war and travel and glory could do for a young man. He was thin and good looking and much more graceful than he had been when he was young. It was plain enough to Susan that he had entirely recovered from his youthful infatuation for herself.

And she had dreamed of punishing Colinette by flirting with her lieutenant! Foolish, and vain, and unkind! How long would it take her to learn that she was not attractive to men, and

to fall into her place in the background of other people's love affairs?

Once she tripped on a broken place in the walk, and he caught her with a strong, but gentle hand. The touch was, somehow, comforting and pleasant. It thrilled her with a sense of being cared for.

When they returned to the hotel she was tired, and Colinette suggested that she lie down and take a short rest. She did so, intending to think over matters of which she was not allowed to talk.

But the longer she thought the more inextricable became the puzzle. And so she left it and fell to wondering what effect her running away would have upon Jeff when he got back. Would he be sorry when told of her illness? She decided that he would not. His was not a sympathetic nature. But she felt quite sure that he would be sorry because of Colinette's absence.

"And he will try to find us, not on my account, but on hers," she decided. "And he will find us too. He has a car of his own and nothing especial to tie him at home. He and Elmer will jaunt out, inquire along the road, get our trail and keep it until they catch us, and then—what?" When he came to understand how matters were between Colinette and Willie, would he turn for consolation to his old love? And would his old

love condescend to comfort him? Would she be able to forget that horrible morning out in front of the Plummer warehouse when all her love had blazed into hatred and she had thrown his ring (that cherished little ring!) into his face and fled?

"No!" she whispered fiercely, "if I took up with him again it would be only to save my pride before the girls in the shop and the town. It would do that, of course. Folks would say, 'a lover's tiff, that was all,' instead of 'he threw her over for a prettier girl.' "

But she knew, now, that she would hate in place of loving him, and to marry a man whom you hate and fear merely to save your pride is too great a price to pay.

"But many a girl does it," Susan reflected.

She dozed off thinking of the touch of Lieutenant Klatz's hand upon her sleeve when she had stumbled that morning.

Lieutenant Klatz! Funny, how different he was from good old Willie Klatz who had thought so much of her once on a time. Willie would never tire of a girl whom he had once loved, and yet—he had done just that, hadn't he? Hadn't he tired of her the same as Jeff Plummer had tired of her?

Susan slept quite soundly until long after the lunch hour. She awoke to the sound of Coli-

nette's voice, and what Colinette said was so queer, Susan thought she must still be more or less asleep and had dreamed the words.

"Sound asleep, and pale enough to serve our purpose."

What did she mean by that? "Pale enough to serve our purpose?" But she would not ask questions; not if the moon fell out of the sky—

She was off again, this time for a nice long nap.

When she came to herself the second time she had a queer fancy that the outside room was full of people. She got up, smoothed her hair, opened the door and found it even so. At least there were four persons in the little private sitting room, and that came near to filling it. There were Grandmother Gard, Colinette, Willie, and—

"Why Ma Dunlap!" she called out, "how did you get here?"

"Dear girl!" trembled Mrs. Dunlap and came and took Susan in her arms and kissed her.

"You see she's better the minute you get here!" triumphed Colinette. "Just the minute she hears your voice, up she gets quite herself. Now Aunt Susan, you must stay with us. We need you, and it will do you good too. Now will you? You can see easily that it is going to take us all to pull this girl through. Besides, grandmother can't stay, and we must have someone to chape-

rone us. It wouldn't be just right to be traveling off alone with a desperate character like the lieutenant here. If you don't stay with us the trip must be given up and Sue taken back again to the grind."

"But Luther won't understand—" began Mrs. Dunlap.

"I'll explain to him," promised Mrs. Gard.

"And explain," added Colinette, "that it will be useless to try to reach us because we shall travel rapidly from one place to another, and can't wait to receive mail at any given address."

"Well, the moon has fallen out of the sky and is bowling along our path," sighed Susan, "bowling right along like a cartwheel, but I haven't said a word, have I?"

Mrs. Dunlap turned a startled glance upon her daughter. At that moment she believed Susan to be a very sick girl.

"You've been wonderful," owned Colinette.

The next morning they saw Mrs. Gard off for home.

"I do wish you felt that you could stay," mourned Susan, as they waited at the station for the train.

"I can't," replied Mrs. Gard. "I never have been hard-hearted where chickens are concerned, and I wouldn't leave a wooden chicken for Elmer Dunlap to look after."

Colinette pressed close to her grandmother's shoulder as she mounted the car steps. "Remember, grandmother," she whispered, "you are to have the rheumatism this summer if you ever expect to have it. Uncle Luther has always been looking forward to your having it; now let it overtake you while we are away. Tell him you are too old and lame to cook for him and Elmer. Let 'em coax Aunt Rinty to help them out, or let them do their own cooking. You promise?"

"Yes," replied grandmother, and hurried to her place in the car.

Colinette called up to her window as the train moved out, "We shall be good and lost—lost—You'll be sorry you didn't stay with us. Grandmother shook a handkerchief at her and the train puffed away.

Shortly after, bowling along under a blue, blue sky, the motoring party left Little Clyde miles to the southward. Colinette again occupied the seat beside the driver, Mrs. Dunlap curling up in a happy little bundle on the back seat beside her big daughter, and enjoying every inch of the ride.

"Ain't it wonderful how we fly along!" she exclaimed, "and ain't Willie a wonderful driver?"

"He is," assented Susan absent-mindedly. "How did you come to—that is, how did you know how to find us?"

"The telegram said I was to meet you at Little Clyde."

"Were you scared when you got the message?"

"Scared? I nearly fainted away. Luther wa'n't home when the boy brought it up. I left word with the Klatzes where I had gone and started right off; I had to in order to make the train. I had to borrow my car fare of Mrs. Klatz. What I can't understand is how you come to get better so quick. You was so bad yesterday, and now able to ride out like this."

"One has their ups and downs in sickness," suggested Susan vaguely.

"Now that you are better, I ought to get back home as soon as I can, I s'pose."

"If you go we shall have to go too. And oh, how I hate to go back, ma! Seems to me pa might better be put to a little inconvenience in order to help me get entirely well. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know but I do, lookin' at it in that way."

"Was—Elmer home when you left?"

"Just got in, and as hungry as any hunter ever could be. Aunt Rinthy and Helen came home from Milltown too. Aunt Rinthy was awful disappointed."

"To hear that I was worse?"

"She didn't mention that although, of course,

she'd hate to hear it, but she wanted to show me Helen's new things. She said they was perfectly gorgeous. She said they would probably take a little sprint in their car and join us—that is, if you got better and stayed out any time.

“When the boys got home Jeff brought Elmer right up in his car. I was glad you was away. He asked after you. He said they heard as they come up through town that you'd been awful sick. He was pretty well astonished to hear that you was off on a trip. He said, ‘Guess we'll have to take the gas wagon and tag along, Elmer.’ Your pa was mad. He said he thought it was up to Elmer to git back to work some time this summer; said he thought he'd had ‘trippin’ ’ enough. But I bet some of 'em will go up to Little Clyde before many days.

“My! These automobiles are wonderful things! Everybody goes everywhere they want to in no time. Now Jeff Plummer, or your Uncle Waldo won't think no more of making a trip up to Little Clyde than we would have thought of driving up to Lake Jane when I was a girl. Just look at that little house; ain't it pretty? Like a picture card. My, this is certainly restful!”

Susan squeezed her mother's hand and giggled in sheer delight. She began to forgive Colinette everything. For was not this Colinette's doings—this outing for dear, overworked mother?

Susan did a good deal of thinking during those flying miles. She came to a full realization of her foolishness in the matter of her quarrel with Jeff. She had been like a wounded animal, ready to attack the first object in her path, said object happening to be her pretty cousin.

It must be true that Colinette had not cared for Jeff, for, if she had, there was nothing now to stand between them. And yet—when she remembered certain fleeting glances which she had intercepted between them on that night of the dance, she could not understand Colinette.

She watched Colinette and Willie in the seat ahead, and it certainly would have required a stretch of the imagination to discern anything loverlike in their attitude toward each other. Susan remembered those earnest, secret confabs between the two before starting on this trip; yet here, in the car, Willie's mind seemed to be concentrated on getting over as many miles as possible between meals, and Colinette's on some deep plan, not especially cheerful, for she was more than usually sober and silent.

As to Susan herself, the complexities and perplexities of life were not in her line. They exhausted her. She wished to be able to keep her mind off Colinette, Willie, Jeff Plummer and the rest, but did not seem able to do so with any degree of success. But whatever her own or

Colinette's perplexities, hopes and fears, it was plainly evident that "ma" was enjoying this ride as she had never enjoyed anything before in Susan's remembrance.

They had traveled a long distance in silence when Colinette turned and inquired of Mrs. Dunlap, "so Jeff and Elmer are going to hunt us down, are they? And Aunt Rinthy too? Well, we shall have to be wary. It will be fun dodging them."

"Well, we are a hundred and fifty miles nearer home than we were this morning," Willie announced. "If they undertake to trail us they'll make clear round the road we've just come over, but they may take a tumble, cut across country and just chance on us."

Mrs. Dunlap gave it as her opinion that between them all, with two cars on the road, they would be pretty sure to catch up and that before very long.

"Oh dear!" sighed Susan.

Colinette gave her a reassuring glance. "They haven't caught us yet," she reminded them.

XII

MRS. GARD had what she considered the best of luck in getting home. The train was, if anything, ahead of time. This enabled her to gain her own door without meeting Dunlap, a Pickens, or even a Klatz. She decided to do what little cooking she needed to do on the oil stove so that no telltale plume of smoke should rise from her chimney. It would be as well for Luther to feel that young Susan was bad enough to need her grandmother as well as her mother, at least for a day.

She got into one of her cool, faded, everyday dresses, changed her shoes for the familiar sloppy ones, the feel of which upon her feet gave her a thrill of home comfort which justified her stubbornness in not yielding to Colinette's wish and staying with the tourists. Then she drew the patent rocker in from one of the windows to watch the supper folks go by.

Helen Pickens first, her father a few moments later; then Luther Dunlap with a package of meat for his supper. She watched for Elmer, but Elmer did not put in an appearance.

The smoke arose from the Dunlap chimney,

appraising the watcher of the progress Luther was making with his supper. Well, it would be good for Luther to cook his own steak for a while.

After finally giving up Elmer, she went out into the kitchen, lighted the oil stove and cooked an egg and the two cold boiled potatoes left for this very occasion.

How much she had seen since she had boiled those two potatoes; farmhouses and cows grazing in green pastures and little bridges over purling brooks; and patches of woodland with fields of yellowing grain or rustling corn in rows between; how many machines they had met, or overtaken, or failed to overtake; and villages, and Little Clyde with its pretty houses and bustle of business. Bigger and more cityfied, of course, than Redmoon, but wasn't it fine to be back in Redmoon and in her own quiet kitchen!

She did hope her daughter would be enabled to enjoy a little of the pleasures of travel before they caught and brought her back to slavery. Poor Susan, who had never seen cities or villages, or ridden on the cars or in automobiles.

Mrs. Gard herself had, once upon a time, been surfeited with towns and steam cars and hotels. That was when she had been "on tour" with Colinette and Neal Brackley and the doll show. Young Susan went spring and fall to the city

for goods, but this was Susan Dunlap's first vacation; her very first, and Mrs. Gard hoped fervently that it might at least stretch over three or four days. She hoped for no longer respite, for as soon as Luther learned that young Susan was out of danger he would insist upon his wife's return.

Susan could thank Colinette for this outing. Little minx! She certainly brought things about with that motto of hers. Trouble with that motto of Colinette's was that it was so apt to cut short corners on other folks' mottoes. For instance: 'Honesty is the Best Policy.' Was starting out on a trip supposedly of two or three weeks' duration, yet leaving two cold boiled potatoes in the pantry, knowing they would not spoil before you came home to fry them—was that really fighting under the honesty banner? Mrs. Gard sighed.

And now this rheumatism to which she was committed. She felt of a joint or two in hopes of discovering a little soreness or stiffness, such as should have been hers by right at her time of life, but found nothing approaching rheumatism. She had prayed fervently to be kept from sickness in order to be of service to those she loved, and her prayer had been graciously answered. Was she to turn about now and pray for rheumatism?

She decided that this was not necessary. "But

there is this much about it, I will not tell whoppers," said Grandmother Gard aloud. "I will do the best I can with what-do-yeh-call-'ems—evasions, but I will not lie."

She slept in Redmoon that night without a soul dreaming of her presence in the town. She ate her meals and did a little surreptitious cleaning up, enjoying the thrills of a boy who steals apples he doesn't want just for the excitement of keeping from being caught. Once a peddler knocked at the door, and once the telephone rang—undoubtedly a summons from some church sister unaware of her absence.

At night, after the six o'clock train had disappeared on its way out of Redmoon, a plume of smoke arose from her chimney; her doors and windows stood open once more to let out the strong smell of arnica which reeked within.

Waldo Pickens and Luther Dunlap, walking up from town together, were the first to note the signs of occupancy in the Gard cottage. They hurried in. Mrs. Gard grasped a cane which she had placed handily beside the kitchen door and hobbled forth to meet them.

"Well, well, now what's the matter with you?" demanded Luther.

"Rheumatism, eh?" triumphed Waldo.

"I don't know what you'd call it," parried Mrs. Gard, "and I don't know what a doctor would

call it, but whatever it is, I wish I could git along without it."

"Rheumatism, that's what it is," said Waldo Pickens.

"Well, you've always been expectin' me to have it, ain't you, Waldo?" Mrs. Gard let herself gingerly down into the patent rocker.

"Yes, an' now you've got it."

"There," reflected Mrs. Gard, "Waldo's done the job for me; he's given me the rheumatism—just what I need—an' not charged me a cent."

"And let me tell you something else," went on Waldo, "once you git it, you've got it for good. You'll never be free from it agin as long as you live. It will slip from once place to another, back, legs, shoulders, and then some fine day—heart, an' there you be!"

"I s'pose so," assented Mrs. Gard cheerfully.

"Well, I take it the girl is better or you wouldn't be here," said Luther Dunlap.

"Oh I wasn't much good to take care of the sick," sighed Mrs. Gard, fondling the head of her cane. "Susan needed her ma."

"Is she down flat in bed again, same as she was before?" demanded Waldo.

"She's been flat in bed by spells," owned Mrs. Gard.

"She no business to have went," declared Luther. "I knew from the first how it would

turn out. Now she can come back home and lay around all the rest of the summer and probably not be able to go to the city for goods in September as she oughter."

"It was all nonsense," agreed Waldo Pickens, "I could a told you that. Travelin' round country in an automobile is for well folks, an' mighty well folks; 't'ain't for sick ones. Look what it's done for Mother Gard, here."

"They'll all git ride enough by the time they git home from Little Clyde," said Luther. "Let's see-e-e, how many miles is it to Little Clyde, Waldo?"

"About two hundred, I guess."

"Well, the boys are there by this time. They'll be rollin' home by tonight. Why didn't you wait, Mother Gard, an' save carfare? Though of course you didn't know before you started that the boys was comin'."

"What boys?" asked Mrs. Gard, although she knew what boys well enough.

"Oh, as soon as I got the word I sent Jeff an' Elmer up after 'em. My wife no business to let young Susan sail off the way she done, an' half sick as she was. And the place for my wife is home 'tendin' to her business. When a person has something to do in this world the thing for them to do is to stay and tend to it. Of course a telegram that way—why, my goodness! I ex-

pected her to come back in her long box an' nothin' less. You say she was a good deal better when you left, didn't you, Mother Gard? S'pose she'll be able to travel today?"

"Couldn't tell you a thing about that," replied Mrs. Gard in a discouraged voice, a tone which her son-in-law and Waldo Pickens attributed to the rheumatism, but which in reality was born of the knowledge that all the trickery and deceit of herself and of Colinette were, after all, to go for nothing. Undoubtedly the Susans were, even now, nearing the end of their holiday. Coming home in Jeff Plummer's car, too! Very likely Jeff and Susan would make up their quarrel, and be married some time during the summer just as had been originally planned.

Well, it was just another proof of the tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive. But poor young Susan! And so near to getting rid of that Plummer critter for good! Well, we were all in the hands of One who knew what was best for us after all. Perhaps it was the Lord's will that Susan should have that Plummer boy for a husband. Better girls had married worse men, of course, and it wasn't for us poor dying worms to judge. Still, if it could have been fixed up some other way, how nice it would have been!

Mrs. Gard was roused from her reverie by Luther's insistent demand to be told young Su-

san's symptoms in detail. She realized that she was about to enter deep water upon which her raft of entire truthfulness was like to be wrecked, or at the least, was in for a stormy passage. For the first time she was glad to see Rinthy Pickens appear at her door.

"Well for the land!" ejaculated that lady, "when did you git back?" And then, without waiting for a reply, "how's Susan Taylor?"

Mrs. Gard opened her mouth to reply. It was getting pretty thick. She might have managed one at a time, but all three this way—

But she was spared. At that moment a dusty automobile turned the Pettingill corner and whirled to a stop before her door. From it alighted Elmer and Jeff Plummer. The two old men inside the house jumped up and met the two young men on the porch. All four spoke as with one voice:

"Where are the girls?"

"Didn't you git 'em?" demanded Luther Dunlap.

"Why no. Ain't they home?" asked Jeff Plummer in a disappointed voice.

"Home!" shouted Luther, "why should they be home? Didn't you find 'em in Little Clyde?"

"No, the hotel man said they started for home about noon yesterday."

"Sick girl and all?" questioned Waldo Pickens.

"Sick girl and all," answered Jeff Plummer, and added inanely, "haven't they got in yet?"

"This is a pretty kettle of fish!" put in Aunt Rinthy. "Broke down on the road sum'mers I bet, and with Susan Taylor in the state she's in they'll have to put up in some hotel, and that'll run into a nice sum of money."

"Guess Elmer an' I will have to go right up to your house to supper," suggested Luther Dunlap. "I can manage for myself alone, but I can't cook for a hull boardin'-house."

"Oh my stars! There ain't a thing in my house to eat, Luther. Waldo and I are plannin' to take a trip in our car for a few days, and we've just been eatin' from hand to mouth so as not to leave stuff in the pantry to dry up. But, of course, if you an' Elmer are a mind to take pot luck, why I s'pose you can come."

"Guess I'll stay here an' feed with gram'ma," remarked Elmer loftily.

"You'll fare hard here," warned Mrs. Gard. "I've just come home, and I don't feel to git about an' cook. Can't you an' your pa kindah rig up somethin' appetizin' for yourselves between you?"

"Oh well, we can go up to Aunt Rinthy's I suppose," conceded Elmer ungraciously, "but it's chow for me and that pretty soon, let me tell you. I'm about starved. Jeff and I fed pretty light on the way down, didn't we, Jeff?"

Jeff made no reply. He stood sulkily by the door thumbing his cap. He "had no use for Elmer Dunlap" at best, and tonight he was not in a mood to "baby" anybody. What he wanted more than anything else was to "beat that Willie Klatz, who seemed bent on doing a smart turn just because he had hold of a car wheel for the first time in his life!"

"I guess it won't impovrish you to feed us this night," Luther snapped at his sister, "the folks will surely be home before dinner tomorrow, and I'm thinkin' they'll be bowling in here yet tonight some time. Nice silly business! I don't see what possessed Susan to go ranting off to wait on a girl who ain't so bad but that she can git up an' go a automobiling the next day. Huh! You say, boys, the hotel man said they had started for home in the morning?"

"That's what he said," answered Jeff sulkily and went out, got into his car and wheeled away homeward.

Aunt Rinthy would have stayed to "pump Gram'ma Gard," but with the prospect of so much company to supper the pumping operations had to be postponed until the next day.

The next day Mrs. Gard sat calmly in her patent rocker by the front window knitting on her bedspread. Knitting a bedspread is not summer work, but how can a woman with the

rheumatism weed flowerbeds or harvest berries?

Nor did Elmer or Luther Dunlap call in to inquire if there was anything they could do to help. Rinthy Pickens came down and did her pumping with most unsatisfactory results. All she succeeded in finding out was that "Susan had gone to bed, and that she had been awful tickled to see her mother."

Aunt Rinthy remarked repeatedly that "this was pretty kettle of fish!" these piscatorial assertions being elicited by the fact that she did not enjoy Elmer and Luther as steady boarders.

"They've just got to shuffle along for themselves," she declared, "It won't hurt 'em."

"Oh my, no," agreed Mrs. Gard cheerfully, "it won't hurt 'em a mite. Elmer always did over-eat. Now perhaps he won't relish his own cookin' enough to fatten up on it to any great extent. He ain't got any regular job; been out huntin'—one thing or another—all summer, it'll do him good to cook his own and his pa's meals for a change."

"On the other hand," Rinthy felt it her duty to remind Susan's mother, "it seems to me that Susan Dunlap's place is home with her family, and not galavantin' round the country in a car."

"A little vacation won't hurt her, no more'n it will hurt Elmer to do the cookin'. She never has had a vacation, Rinthy, if you can call goin'

to take care of a sick girl a vacation. If someone should telegraph you that Helen was sick and wanted you, I guess you'd go, wouldn't you?"

"The goin' was all right; it's the stayin' that's kickin' up the muss," said Aunt Rinthy. "But I s'pose they'll be in today."

Aunt Rinthy "s'posed" wrong. They were not "in today," nor the next, nor the next. Grandmother Gard received a letter with a postmark blurred beyond deciphering, announcing that Susan was so much better they had decided to tour around for a few weeks until she had entirely recovered. The note was from Colinette.

"Don't try to write us," she cautioned, "because we shall stop at no postoffices for a while. We just mean to be good and lost. The trip is doing Aunt Susan no end of good. Tell Uncle Luther this. He will be pleased I'm sure."

"Pleased!" howled Uncle Luther, when the news was broken to him, "pleased! I wonder if she think's I'm pleased at starvin' to death! Pleased in a pig's eye! You should have seen our breakfast this mornin'! Elmer said he was sick of bread, and so he made some gems. You could have brained Goliath with 'em. Elmer is an awful cook. He's better on the hunt, an' that's where he's goin'—right off, too. He an' Jeff are goin' to cover the hull state, but they're goin' to run down Willie Klatz and the bunch!

Why, good land! Mother Gard, you oughter have help in your condition—so lame you can't hobble out to the henhouse after an egg."

"Oh I'm makin' out all right," said Mrs. Gard cheerfully, "I wouldn't have 'em shorten their trip on my account."

"Well, it's on your account that the boys are sailin' out just the same. They're goin' to hunt out the crowd and tell 'em they ought to be ashamed of themselves—ridin' around the country an' you here sick abed and no one to do a turn for you."

"Oh they know that you an' Elmer will look after me all right," said Mrs. Gard, and her son-in-law glanced at her askance to determine whether she meant it, or was trying to be sarcastic.

XIII

LUTHER DUNLAP and Jeff Plummer were entirely agreed upon one point at least, the immediate running down of Willie Klatz and his load.

"We can get over the ground a good deal faster than Willie can make it," Jeff assured his sympathizer. "I know every mile of the good roads, and I know pretty well the route they'll follow. They'll do what's called the big circle. Everybody does."

"You can't count on their doin' what anybody else does," Luther warned him. "John Gard's girl will do the contrary thing every time. I wish I'd had the bringin' up of the young lady; I bet I'd a taken some of the conceit out of her."

The two young men started out upon their trailing expedition primed with authoritative messages concerning Mrs. Gard's health, none of which emanated from Mrs. Gard herself. That lady went contentedly about her household duties, moving with her wonted swiftness when alone, but grasping her cane the moment a step sounded on the porch. After dusk she even managed some garden work, especially that which she dare not turn over to the Reedy boy. Every day she

declined invitations from the Pickenses, or from Luther Dunlap himself to help along a little with Luther's cooking, but not once had she failed in keeping her promise to Colinette.

"For you know where it will lead you if you yield an inch," Colinette had warned. "First a loaf of bread, then 'guess I'll have to take supper with you tonight, Mother Gard,' then billeted on you for keeps. It is up to you and me to look after the Susans a little." This last argument had fastened the dread disease of rheumatism upon Mrs. Gard and put dimes into the flabby pockets of the Reedy boy.

One morning Mrs. Gard arose with an avid longing to give the house a thorough "redding up." Of course she had "muddled about" shaking a rug of dusting a little here and there—always with her stick within reach—but a thorough soap-and-water scrubbing had not been known in that house since her return from her jaunt.

"And—I just can't stand it," she declared to herself. "I'll go kindah wary till they all put out for work, then I'll set that old cane within grabbin' distance and wade in. That kitchen floor will be surprised, I'll bet a cookie. I never before had such a dusty, musty, mossy-lookin' old house as I've got this minute."

In order to make ready for this saturnalia she planned an extra hearty breakfast for herself.

She even made a cautious trip into the garden after a handful of crisp young onions.

"And I hope I'll know enough to git 'em out of sight if anybody drops in. Luther would think that if I was able to go scoutin' round the garden for onions I might do a little cookin' for him."

She was putting the last pearly onion with its mates into a glass tumbler when a rushing step on the porch alarmed her. She hastily thrust the glass into the cupboard out of sight, grasped her stick and went to meet her caller.

It was Gusta Klatz on her way to the millinery store. She wore an expression of almost fiendish triumph as she stepped inside of Mrs. Gard's door and closed it behind her.

"Ain't it great!" she triumphed, "they can't find 'em anywhere. Mr. Dunlap is just a jawing! He got a letter yesterday from Elmer. It seems that they found the machine laid up in a garage for repairs, but not a trace of the folks. He's trying to make ma believe they've all been murdered. He almost had ma buffaloed for one while, but I told her not to worry. Willie will take care of Susan and her mother, and if he can't, why Colinette can. I just thought I'd run in and tell you so he wouldn't scare you to death. Maybe he doesn't intend to say a word to you about it

for fear of your worrying. Maybe he thinks he'll wait until Jeff and Elmer finds some trace of 'em. Well, I must run along and open shop. I'm all alone now. Helen isn't working nowadays. She's busy getting her mother ready for her automobile trip and herself ready for the Gertie Calkins' wedding. The cards are out, and everybody is excited over it. They say it is to be a grand affair."

Gusta tripped away and Mrs. Gard thoughtfully replaced her little grove of onions on the kitchen table.

More steps—Helen, this time. Once more the onions were whisked out of sight.

"Good morning, gram'ma. Isn't this terrible?"

"Mercy! Helen, what has happened?" Mrs. Gard sank into a chair and motioned Helen to another one which she refused.

"Hasn't Uncle Luther told you about the letter he got yesterday?"

"Ain't seen your Uncle Luther for a number of days. What about the letter? I do hope Susan ain't worse!"

"No, but the boys have found the machine that Willie Klatz drove away, but no Willie Klatz, no Sue, no Colinette, no Aunt Susan. Now whatever do you suppose has become of them?"

"Where did they find the machine? And how

do they know it was the car Willie was driving? And did Willie leave the car at the place where they found it?"

"The car," began Helen impressively, "was left at a garage for repairs by a rough looking fellow who didn't answer the description of Willie Klatz at all. Pa thinks that some highway robber has shot Willie and stolen the car. Why, our folks are just all wrought up over it! Aren't you all wrought up over it, gram'ma?"

"I s'pose I ought to be," replied Mrs. Gard, "but somehow I ain't. I was just goin' to eat my breakfast; won't you set up an' have a cup of coffee, Helen?"

"No thank you, ma is getting breakfast at home now. I ran down to see what you thought about this letter. Ma and pa are just all wrought up over it, and they supposed that you would be."

"Oh I guess the folks are all right. Colinette would let us know if anything was amiss."

"Why, Colinette may be lying out along some lonely country road shot through the heart—that's what pa says."

"Of course she may, but I guess somebody would have found some of 'em by this time; so many folks out in automobiles nowadays. If Colinette is shot, why Willie Klatz and my Susan and young Susan must all be shot and piled up together. They'd make quite a stack that way.

Some farmer or other would be pretty sure to notice it—pile of shot folks like that—”

“Why Gram’ma Gard, how can you talk so—so flippantly about such awful things!”

“Well, all we can do is to wait till we hear from some of ’em,” said Mrs. Gard cheerfully.

“How’s work gittin’ along in the store?”

“I’m not in the store just now; I’m staying home to get ready for Gertie’s wedding—”

“Shouldn’t think you’d feel to think of weddin’s and such fixings when your relations are lost and robbed and murdered this way.”

Helen was annoyed. “But I’m young; I can’t give up life just because Colinette and Willie Klatz have gone off and got themselves into some terrible scrape. But you and pa and ma—”

“Your pa and ma worrying pretty bad, are they?”

“They are going out to join in the search. Pa says he’ll find Aunt Susan and the rest of the bunch if they’re anywhere this side of the Rocky Mountains. They start tomorrow morning early. Pa intended to take a trip somewhere anyway, and he says he intends to show Colinette Gard and Willie Klatz that they can’t run out and hide in this day and age. He says they’ll find out other folks have cars, and know how to run ’em, even if they didn’t learn how in France. Oh, pa’ll find ’em, don’t you fret!”

"I sha'n't fret," promised Mrs. Gard. "I'm trusting in the Lord to bring my child and my grandchildren and Willie Klatz home all safe and sound. They started out for a good purpose, and I have faith to believe they'll accomplish it an' come home in good time."

"But don't you think Aunt Susan is awful foolish to go off galavanting this way?"

"It seems your pa an' ma are goin' off galavantin' tomorrow."

"Oh, well, going to hunt her up."

"But you said your pa intended to take a trip anyway."

"Oh—well—yes—but—well, I must run home; ma said I wasn't to stay. You ought to come up, gram'ma, and see my new dress; it's perfectly lovely! Colinette better hurry home or she will lose the chance to be Gertie's bridesmaid. Gertie told me so herself. Jeff Plummer is to be best man, you know."

Helen went away, and Mrs. Gard thoughtlessly left her cane leaning against the patent rocker when she went out to resume getting breakfast. She had just reinstated the onions, and taken down the skillet to fry the potatoes, when Luther Dunlap arrived with the letter. He did not stop to knock, but with the privilege of close relationship, walked through the living room and ap-

peared in the kitchen door just one second after a tumblerful of green onions had disappeared under the table.

"Hullo," he greeted, "well, how you makin' it?"

"Pretty slow," owned Mrs. Gard truthfully. "Pretty slow. I'm real glad you dropped in, Luther. I'm goin' to ask you to fill my woodbox while you're here, and bring me that swatch of bacon out of the woodhouse, and—"

Luther looked at his watch. "I'll git you some wood and the bacon, but I've got to be to work in half an hour. You'll have to wait for other errands till I git home tonight. I should think Helen could drop down here and do such things for you on a pinch, or Mrs. Klatz. I'll speak to Mrs. Klatz tonight. But I've got something to show you here—"

He drew out and unfolded the letter with great ceremony. Mrs. Gard took it from him and read it. Dunlap seemed rather to expect her to fall in a faint. She folded the letter and handed it back.

"Broke down, have they?" she remarked pleasantly.

Luther had hard work to restrain his indignation at her reception of the news. "What do you think has happened 'em?"

“Nothing very bad, Luther. I think they’ve busted their automobile and are waiting somewhere till it is fixed.”

Luther snorted. “Well, we’ll soon know. Waldo and Rinthy are starting out tomorrow mornin’ early to find ’em, and I’m goin’ with ’em! Yes sir, we’re goin’ to track ’em down. If we happen on ’em before the boys do I’ll bet the boys will feel pretty green.”

“Well do tell, Luther!” ejaculated Mrs. Gard.

“We’re a goin’ to find ’em, and we’re a goin’ to tell ’em what we think of ’em—ridin’ off round the country and leavin’ you here sick an’ not able to help yourself—”

“Now see here, Luther, you needn’t tell ’em anything of the kind. Because I’m gittin’ along splendid. I want ’em to stay and finish their vacation. I want young Susan to git well and strong so she can go to the city for goods when the time comes. Yes, an’ I want Susan Dunlap to git her vacation too. You must remember, Luther, she’s never had one before—”

“Vacation! What does a woman, who sets round a house all day with nothin’ to do except to eat and shove back, need of a vacation? Vacation! Humph!”

Luther stumped off home in high dudgeon, and Mrs. Gard sighed as she reached under the table for her onions.

"Poor Susan!" she murmured. "A man like Luther Dunlap is almost worse to be married to than a really bad man. If he was really bad—beat her or swore at her—she could do something about it. But the law can't touch a nagger."

Mrs. Gard hastily tucked her onions back again as other steps sounded at her door. She assumed her cane and her hobble and opened the door to her visitor. A small, sour-visaged, well-dressed woman stood without.

"Good morning, Mrs. Plummer. Come in," invited Mrs. Gard.

Mrs. Plummer stepped inside with the air of crabbed condescension which was one of the causes of her unpopularity above the railroad. She had come to inquire where Miss Gard or Miss Dunlap could be reached by letter or by wire. She had understood that her son Jefferson and the Dunlap boy were—wherever Miss Gard and Miss Dunlap were, and she wished to get into immediate communication with her son. Jefferson had consented to be Dr. Snyder's best man at his approaching marriage. The cards were out and it was necessary to let Jefferson know.

She clipped her lips together with great precision as she gave forth these important facts, and her beady little black eyes snapped.

Mrs. Gard heard her through placidly then said she was unable to furnish the desired in-

formation because she didn't know where her granddaughters were.

"You don't mean that your granddaughter—the pretty one, is away on a camping trip and that you don't know where she is?" Mrs. Plummer's tone was meant to convey to Mrs. Gard how very ignorant she was in regard to the conventionalities, not to say decencies of society.

"Colinette," replied Mrs. Gard, "is smart enough to take care of herself wherever she is. As you perhaps remember, she and I traveled with our show for over a year, and after that she lived in New York a good spell and durin' the War she was a canteen worker over in France. She's just naturally sharp, you know, an' don't need an old woman standin' over her with a stick to keep her straight. But if she did, my daughter, Mrs. Dunlap, is with the party, wherever they are, and Willie Klatz is with 'em, and the Lord is with 'em to care for and to bless, for I've asked Him to look after the hull crowd, and I have faith to believe that He will. You see, Colinette is really safer'n usual."

"We must get in touch with them on account of this wedding," reiterated Mrs. Plummer. "Gertie Calkins is wild—just wild—about their all being gone. She expects Miss Gard to be her bridesmaid, doesn't she?"

"I don't know; Colinette never said anything about it."

"Oh, then I presume I'm mistaken. Because if Gertie Calkins had asked your granddaughter to be her bridesmaid you would certainly have heard something about it."

She rose to go, and Mrs. Gard was glad that the call was to be short. She was growing keen for her breakfast. But her troubles were not at an end. As she stood at the door to watch Mrs. Plummer mince down the front walk she descried Rinthy Pickens' sun hat looming in the west. She gripped her cane securely and awaited the onslaught.

Mrs. Pickens had come to borrow her traveling bag for her jaunt. She asked what message she should carry to Colinette from her.

"Providing you find her, you may tell her I'm all right exceptin' a little touch of—well, you might call it rheumatism; I don't know what else to call it."

"I don't think you need hunt another name," replied Aunt Rinthy with one of her flat smiles. "And you needn't fear but what we'll find her. When Waldo sets out to do a thing he generally does it. He is real peeved, Waldo is, at the way they've been actin'. He says it's a pretty kettle of fish—actin' this way—and somebody else havin' to do their cookin'. They ain't been a

day since they went that Luther or Elmer, one or t'other, ain't been to our house for meals. 'Course, if you hadn't been laid up this way you might at least have took Elmer off my hands. I don't mind Luther so much, but Elmer is a pest, I will say that.

"And Gertie Calkins is just at her wits' end to know what to do! Colinette, you know—her bridesmaid, and Jeff Plummer—why, it's a pretty kettle of fish!"

After Mrs. Pickens had started up the hill on her way home Mrs. Gard locked the door and hurried to the kitchen without the sign of a limp. She discarded her cane with an impatient little bump, stooped and drew forth her onions and plumped them into the middle of the table with a bang which nearly broke the glass which held them.

"There you are, an' there you're a goin' to set till I eat you!" she scolded. "They've all been here now except Waldo Pickens, and if he comes he'll have to pound to git in, and I'll have time to fix things before I let him in—"

Knuckles on the front door, insistent knuckles, knuckles which told of a determination not to be denied.

She went to the door very slowly. She wished to be slow. She wished to be provoking. She wished to keep him waiting as long as she dare.

She opened the door, then gave a little cry of welcome. Her stick rolled unheeded to the floor while she grasped the caller around the neck and planted a hearty kiss upon either cheek.

XIV

THE visitor so warmly welcomed by Mrs. Gard was a young man with the tanned face, closely cropped hair, and eager, seeking eyes of the returned soldier—Captain Neal Brackley.

Mrs. Gard brought forth the “other rocking-chair.” Captain Brackley sank into it with a tired slump and let his eyes roam about the homely old room which he knew so well. His whole attitude spoke of fatigue, or so it appeared to Mrs. Gard.

“And so you are just home from the wars, Neal?” said Mrs. Gard.

“Just home, grandmother, and yours has been my first welcome. Poor little mother is still sick in Florida. Father is there with her and I am going from here, but—I had to come here first, you see, to look after the place and—well to see you and Colinette and all—but of course you expected me.”

“Only that somebody said that a man was workin’ in the Brackley yard gittin’ it ready for the family.”

“But I wrote Colinette that I was coming. She must have received the letter at least a month ago.”

A dim remembrance of that overseas letter which had caused so much disturbance in the neighborhood, the letter which Gusta Klatz had been so sure was from her brother, came to Mrs. Gard's mind. That letter had been the match to set the fire of anger which had licked up poor Susan's romance. She remembered that just about that time Colinette had showed an uneasiness of mind, a vague unhappiness, as if some secret anxiety weighed upon her. And so the letter had been from Neal Brackley to announce his coming!

Why should such a letter from Neal make Colinette sad and uneasy, unless there had been some sort of an affair between her and Neal, an affair which she regretted and would rather forget? If this were not the case, why had she not shown the letter to her grandmother, and announced a bit of news which she knew would be welcome? Mrs. Gard adored Neal Brackley, and always had since the long tour which she and Colinette had made through the country with him and "The Kitty Candle Unmoving Picture Company," as they had called their little puppet show. Neal had been nothing but a big, kindly boy then who played the piano wonderfully. Neal's music was really the only part of the show which amounted to anything, Colinette had always said, and now Mrs. Gard knew it. Neal had never

hinted at such a thing. Perhaps he did not know it. He had never displayed any of the arrogance of young masculinity toward his partners, the old woman and the young girl. Instead he had been their protector, their big brother, their general factotum.

Looking at those fine, steely brown fingers lying along the arms of the "other rocking-chair," Grandmother Gard remembered the thrill with which she always heard their first touch of the piano keys "down in front," while she and Colinette stood nervously awaiting the beginning of their act; Colinette in her little green satin dress (Colinette was superstitious about wearing green; she believed she would change her luck if she changed the color of her stage dress) tense, watchful, and Mrs. Gard herself in a perspiration of anxiety, lest some of the little characters in the miniature theatre should topple over as she hastily arranged them in the different tableaux, while Colinette out in front told the story.

And the relief when, in the last tableau of all, Neal broke into the wild Irish jig which the little Irish men and women were supposed to be dancing. The sight of Neal Brackley there in the chair brought it all back to her vividly.

"Where is Colinette?" asked Neal suddenly.

Mrs. Gard started. "I—don't know where Colinette is."

"Don't know—don't know where she is, grandmother?"

Mrs. Gard began to explain in a hurried, unsatisfactory manner. At the time it had all happened there had seemed to be reason enough for Colinette's plan; now, looking at it through Neal Brackley's eyes, she could not help wondering if the letter had not played a greater part in Colinette's flight and continued absence than either young Susan's illness, or Susan Dunlap's need of a vacation.

The more Mrs. Gard attempted to explain the vagaries of Colinette's proceedings, the more she felt herself at sea in regard to them. She saw bewildered disappointment in young Brackley's face.

"I have looked forward to this moment all through the horrible months," he said. "I have dreamed nights of seeing Colinette again, and I have been glad that our meeting was to take place here in Redmoon, the town we both love. You see," he smiled at Mrs. Gard, "I believed that she would be as glad to see me as I would have been to see her."

"She would be glad to see you, Neal," Mrs. Gard assured him. "I wish to goodness I knew

where she was, I'd write to her to come along home. I'd tell her, 'Neal is here and wants to see you before he goes to Florida to his own folks.' She'd come a flyin'; she always liked you."

"But—she knew I was coming and yet she ran away. She went away with—a man she likes better, evidently."

"You mean Willie Klatz?"

"Yes. She has always been fond of him, I knew that, of course."

"He's a good boy," witnessed grandmother heartily. "Willie Klatz is as good as gold. Neal, I'd as soon see Colinette married to Willie Klatz as to anybody I know of except—maybe—"

"Well, grandmother, say it," demanded Neal, "except whom?"

"You!" finished Mrs. Gard, and Neal sprang out of his chair, crossed over and clasped her two hands in an almost painfully fervent grasp.

"You dear woman!" he breathed. "You see, I've always sort of taken it for granted that Colinette belonged to me. All through those months in France I have been so cocksure that she wouldn't run across anybody whom she would like better than she did me. The conceit of it, eh? And she surrounded by handsome young officers and heroes—but I forgot Willie Klatz." He went back to "the other rocker." "Tell me all about Willie Klatz, grandmother. You see, I

still call you grandmother as you told me I might when we were on the road together with the show."

"Willie Klatz is a good deal improved."

"How could Willie be improved?"

"I mean outside. Inside, Willie was all right when he went away. But he stands up straight now, and walks like a soldier instead of slouchin' along like a farmer with a bushel of oats on his back. He's straight and mighty good lookin', Willie is. Nobody need be ashamed of Willie's looks, I can tell you."

"He is a lieutenant, I understand."

"Yes. You should have seen the fuss the town made over him when he came back. Every automobile in town at the depot—my, it was grand! And folks who never noticed Willie before he went away all crowding up to shake him by the hand; Gertie Calkins and the doctor's daughter, an' all. But—it ain't Willie Klatz that I'm afraid of where Colinette is concerned."

"Who then?"

"That piffin' Jeff Plummer; that's the man I'm afraid she's in love with."

"Oh, grandmother, you must be mistaken. She never liked Jeff Plummer, not even when she was a little girl."

"She didn't, but girls change so when they grow up."

Neal shook his head. "I can't believe that."

"I couldn't believe it nuther, until she just the same as told me so herself. And then the way she acted. Here Susan and Jeff were goin' together, engaged to be married, everything set for the weddin' except the day an' date—along comes Colinette, Jeff begins to slacken, begins to talk about postponin' the weddin', begins to hang around Colinette, dances with her, sticks around down at her paint shop till Aunt Rinthy Pickens and the hull town begin to talk, and Susan just tippin' over sick with jealousy—(I'm tellin' you this, Neal, just as I would tell my son John, knowin' it will go no further). And then I made up my mind I'd take a hand.

"I ups and at Colinette about fooling with Susan's beau. I says, 'It ain't fair, and it ain't honest.' She said she knew all that, but that she was workin' by her own old original motto 'When You Want a Thing, Go After It.' I never was so got in my life. I knew then an' there that Susan might as well hang up her fiddle an' her bow where Jeff Plummer was concerned, because whoever Colinette happened to fancy for a husband she could git him if it was the president himself."

"But she has run away from Jeff Plummer; he is hunting for her, you say."

"That's one of the reasons I'm scared of Jeff Plummer. A girl is everlastingly running away

from the man she loves. You can't fool me that way; I done it myself once. Trouble in my case was, the man never ran after me—didn't even notice, really, that I had run away. So that ended the matter."

"That is rather encouraging to me, grandmother, because I can't help believing that Colinette ran away from me."

Mrs. Gard sighed. "Well, maybe so. But you might not feel so encouraged if you'd been right here and seen what I have seen. Colinette is an awful dear good girl, but awful hard to understand. As Mrs. Smith, the dressmaker, said once, that time she wanted the Chedder milliner store and Colinette popped right under her arm and bought it away from her, says she, 'Colinette Gard is a hard person to cope with.' And she told the truth. Colinette is hard to cope with and allers has been. But on the other hand, Colinette will do almost anything for a person she loves."

Captain Brackley gave grandmother a wry little smile. "That's my hope and my despair," he said.

"I can do almost anything with her," boasted Mrs. Gard, and Brackley grinned again, remembering grandmother's success in doing what she willed with Colinette.

"And now won't you step into the kitchen an'

eat a bite of breakfast with me?" invited Mrs. Gard.

"No, thank you, I had my breakfast in Milltown while I waited for my train."

"Well, I ain't had mine yet. I've had so many callers this morning I ain't had a chance to eat a bite."

Neal immediately dragged her into the kitchen, plumped her into her accustomed seat, and took his place at the opposite end of the table. He stretched his legs underneath and a glass jingled and toppled over.

"What's that?" he asked, diving to ascertain.

"Them's onions," tittered Mrs. Gard, getting down on her side of the table and helping to gather up the scattered vegetables. "I'm fond of 'em, but this rheumatism of mine is supposed to keep me from goin' into the garden an' diggin' 'em for myself."

"You never used to be troubled with the rheumatism."

"No, an' I'm about sick of bein' troubled with it now, an' I don't believe I'm goin' to be much longer. I'd about as soon take care of Luther and Elmer as to run for that cane every time the latch clicks." Mrs. Gard was going on to explain her unique disease, but realizing that Captain Brackley's thoughts were far away, she de-

sisted and ate her breakfast, talking of trivial things until Neal rose to go.

“And so you ain’t even goin’ to stay over night in Redmoon, or go to your own house or down to see Colinette’s picture of Uncle Picken’s back yard (such a queer thing to work on all spring), or see any of the folks?”

“I think not. I meant only to make a flying visit; to say hello to my fellow members of the Kitty Candle Company. I mustn’t neglect mother, you know. But—I wish you’d write me, grandmother, and tell me which man finds the wanderer. I have a theory that when Colinette gets good and ready to be found, the right man will be allowed to find her. You say the boys traced the party to Cambria where they found the car laid up for repairs?”

“It was at a little town near Cambria, Lovejoy, by name, where they found the car, but no folks.”

“Thank you, grandmother. Good-by, and be sure to write.”

Mrs. Gard watched her visitor going slowly and thoughtfully down the hill in the direction of the railway station. She felt a rising anger in her heart towards Colinette.

“Such a chance! Such a chance!” she muttered, “and to throw it away for—what? Is she really crazy after that—that Jeff Plummer?”

I have thought at times that she come of better stock than any Gard could boast, an' then agin—sometimes—I dunno—I guess all girls are about alike when it comes to fallin' in love.

“And what a pity that they have to fall in love before they have any judgment; have to pick out their life partner when they ain't got sense enough to pick out a pair of shoes to the best advantage!

“An' yet, up to this fallin' in love business, Colinette has shown such extra good sense in everything. She's gone right plum agin my wants and wishes a number of times and come out ahead—showed that she was in the right.

“Well, it takes me back to that Sidney Dish affair when I was young myself. I wanted Sidney, and John Gard wanted me—an' got me. And it was a good thing he did, for Dish didn't amount to a hill o' beans. I knew he was a no account critter, but I'd a married him just the same if I had got the chance.

“I thought if I disappeared a while Sidney would wake up to the fact that he couldn't git along without me. So I coaxed ma to let me go over into Calumet County to visit Aunt Mary, and when I come back Sidney Dish was goin' with Angeline Porter and they was married soon after that.

“Dear me, how it all comes back! Well, my mother was a prayin' woman, an' Angelin's wa'n't,

and maybe that's the reason Angeline got Sidney Dish and I got John Gard.

"And this reminds me, it ain't my duty to carry Colinette and her doin's on my shoulders all alone—I can't do it—she's too hard to cope with. I'll turn the hull matter over to the Lord."

And so, although Captain Brackley opened the car window toward the west, and gazed back at the little gray house on the hill as his train swept out of Redmoon, he did not, as he had hoped to do, catch sight of a beloved old figure on the front porch or in the front door. The door was closed tightly and locked, while Mrs. Gard on her knees in the best bedroom prayed fervently for help and guidance in coping with Colinette.

XV

LOVEJOY was a happy village, fond of excitement, but having little of it. In the winter there were the M. E. Christmas tree and concert, the Ladies' Aid suppers, and the K. O. P. ball; in the summer, there was keeping track of stray motorists who left the regular route and came to grief on the execrable roads which surrounded the town, and were towed in to Hank Jensen's garage for repairs.

Last but not least were the gipsies. They were really the event of Lovejoy's summer; its own particular institution. Not only Lovejoy, but Cambria also drove out to Bennet's sheep pasture—a particularly rough piece of ground—to have its fortune told. Such seekers after knowledge as came in cars usually unloaded at the roadside and made the rocky journey across the pasture on foot. But now and then a lady of eighty or so would drive a bony white horse and creaking buggy to the very margin of the stream on the further bank of which the gipsies pitched their tents. Here she would descend, totter across the little foot-bridge and cheerfully pay her dollar to ascertain what was in store for her. Everybody

came, of both sexes and all ages. Bennet's pasture was a fat stand for gipsies.

And Lovejoy knew how to treat gipsies. It did not allow its children and youths to pester them. It respected their not unreasonable wish for seclusion. The most venturesome hesitated before crossing the foot-bridge uninvited. The tents were pitched just in front of the thick oak grove which bounded the Bennet pasture to the north. In former days the gipsies had forded the stream and driven their wagons and horses and live stock through the muddy water to the camping ground. Now they traveled by motor, like the rest of the world, and came in through Bennet's north line fence which was immediately nailed up behind them. Therefore their public reached them as of old by way of the rocky pasture road and the foot-bridge.

From this point of vantage the fortune tellers could watch the approach of a "prospect" from the time it left the main road by way of the pasture gate until its arrival at the foot-bridge. It would have been a dull gipsy indeed who could not have discovered something of the history of each individual in the groups as they approached the camp, their frank comments and high pitched laughter reaching the soothsayer long before they did themselves. A sharp-eared gipsy could often give to her astonished patrons not only the date

of an approaching marriage, but the names of the contracting parties.

This year the fortune telling had been more wonderful than ever before. The first intimation which Lovejoy received that her welcome guests had arrived was when a dark fellow with black eyes and snaky locks drove a motor car loaded with women and children through Main Street. One of his passengers was an extremely old woman, another a woman who appeared to be very ill, and there was a foolish child. The male gipsy had driven slowly to accommodate his speed to a bony old horse hitched behind his car. This animal he left with Hank Jensen to be taken care of until he should return for it which he did in exactly three days. He came back alone, this time, leaving his car with Jensen for repairs and riding the old horse out of town.

Questioned as to why he was not staying at the usual camping ground in Bennet's pasture, he returned surly answers intimating that although he and his sick wife were moving farther on to join another branch of their family encamped some forty miles to the westward, yet there were gipsies "of another tribe" staying as usual in Bennet's pasture.

This was all Lovejoy found out until it began to visit the camp. A party of young folks who were the first to go out brought back such glow-

ing accounts of the prowess of a certain young gipsy in the fortune-telling line that Bennet's pasture road grew rougher and rougher from much travel.

"That gipsy knows the very thoughts of your heart!" sighed one young girl, forgetting how she and her chum had talked over those thoughts in a loud tone as they stumbled along over the pasture road.

No one knew exactly how many persons made up this encampment. Different ones thought there were at least three men, an elderly, thin little gipsy woman, and a tall, imperious one, beside the skilful fortune-teller, Gipsy Moll, whose white tent crowded close to the edge of the brook (river, Lovejoy called the stream).

Many had noticed one peculiarity about this camp; there were no ringboned and spavined horses, no dogs, no children anywhere in sight. The one tall gipsy who had passed through the town with his load seemed to have exhausted the supply of these characteristic adjuncts of a gipsy encampment.

Perhaps it was this very lack which attracted the inhabitants of Cambria and Lovejoy in such numbers. The one large van mounted upon a substantial motor truck, the two small tents upon the green between the grove and the river, the crackling campfire visible any night from the

road, were sufficiently picturesque and mysterious to intrigue the most exacting even without the presence of that slender, feminine heathen who "knew the thoughts of your heart."

One afternoon this serious young women clinked two silver dollars into the little black velvet bag which always hung from her girdle for the express purpose of receiving silver dollars, and waved a fervent farewell to two admiring patrons who took the rocky road in the direction of the main thoroughfare, two dollars poorer but many dollars happier, for each had been assured of things hoped for but as yet unseen.

In fact, it was surprising how uniformly fortunate the denizens of Lovejoy and Cambria were about to become, if there was any truth at all in fortune telling.

The gipsy stood like a little statue on the bank of the stream watching her visitors depart. The red of her short, full skirt and of the silk handkerchief which bound her raven locks, made brilliant splashes of color against the black-green of the oaks and the lighter green of the foreground. To the west stood the van with its steps let down, and its open door revealing sundry homely domestic belongings which gave a touch of suggested comfort even to that wild scene; the white roll of the bunk edge peeping from between protecting calico curtains; a small rocking-chair; a square

of carpet on the floor of the van; a mirror against the wall with a case beneath for brush and comb. To the east of the foot-bridge a big gipsy man piled faggots beneath a kettle. The faggots made the fire leap merrily, and the steam rise from the kettle.

A woman came and removed the kettle cover, letting out an appetizing smell of broth which floated over the camp. A large girl, moving languidly, came from somewhere behind the thick little grove of pin oak with a trail of white sewing fluttering over one arm. For gipsies must be clothed and fed as well as the rest of the world. This girl also wore a red cotton dress, but of a darker color and splotched over with gaudy leaves and flowers.

"That soup smells good," she said, and came and took the spoon from the small woman. She gave the contents of the kettle a stir or two, then handed the spoon back as if through a sudden lack of interest and turned to meet the small gipsy who approached the group.

The latter proceeded to untie the red handkerchief, thus revealing the blue-black hair matted closely about her head. She did not stop at the red handkerchief, but also removed the blue-black hair and shook out a mane of red gold which reached to her waist.

"You had better hold yourself in readiness, Su-

san," she advised. "You may have to tell a fortune or two. I feel that I just must wash my hair."

She thrust a hand into the little black, dangling purse at her side. "Ten dollars today already. We're paying a fearful rent to Gipsy Lovell. I should have stipulated a commission."

"But who dreamed you'd be such a success at it, dear," purred the little woman, stirring away at the mixture in the kettle.

Susan sat down upon a camp stool, her elbows on her knees.

"I won't do it," she announced. "I couldn't tell fortunes. I can't rattle off—lies, as you do, Colinette."

Colinette sat down upon the grass and crossed her feet in front of her. She tenderly placed the red handkerchief and black wig within easy reach and proceeded to arrange her own hair.

"I try not to lie any more than is necessary," she assured Susan, "and we must keep our end of the bargain. Remember what a lucky chance this was—this gipsy deal. He left us the van with the understanding that we were to carry on his business here while he was away. Think what a good opinion he must have had of us. He read our character at once, you see, and knew that we would not knock down fares. Our rent for the furnished van and the camping site and

the good will, to be whatever we took in in the regulation gipsy way—horse-trading, dog-stealing, fortune-telling. Willie absolutely refuses to steal dogs, and you and Aunt Susan won't tell fortunes, so it's up to Little Colinette to pay the rent. But, really, I didn't suppose the life of a gipsy fortune-teller was so—onerous or so remunerative. We told him that we wouldn't go into the towns and solicit fortune telling, but that we would be willing to serve such seekers as hunted us out down here in the pasture. So far as we know, Lovell has kept his word and we must keep ours. Willie," she called, "Susan absolutely refuses to help pay the rent, even through the off hours, which as we all know now, is between seven and eleven in the morning, and from five until eight at night. If she and Aunt Susan won't spell me now and then, why, you will have to do it."

"I never heard of a gipsy man telling fortunes," objected Willie, coming up with an armful of wood, "I don't believe it would go down with the public."

"Why of course gipsy men never tell fortunes," corroborated Mrs. Dunlap, as she handed around soup and bread to the assembled company. "It would be a dead giveaway. Which will you have in your soup, Willie, bread or crackers?"

"Neither do gipsy men cut wood and bring

water from the spring," returned Colinette, deftly balancing her soup dish in her lap and savoring its contents with the zest of an epicure.

Willie Klatz smiled at her. "I have to do something," he objected, "And I told the guy I wouldn't go into town to buy or trade horses or dogs, so what is the proper gipsy thing for me to do?"

"Well, of course, the natural thing for you to do, I suppose, in order to keep strictly in the picture, would be to lie on your back and smoke. But we will excuse you if you feel more like cutting wood, toting water from the spring, and helping with the dishes. If this is all of the bill of fare for tonight, Aunt Susan, I'll let him help me carry the bowls around to the kitchen and wash 'em up."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," objected Susan. "I always wash the dishes, don't I? Well then, why should you and Willie carry the bowls to the kitchen; that's the job of the dishwasher. I don't mean to be a shirk; I want to do my part of the work as well as take my share of the enjoyment, but I just can't tell fortunes. I'm not a good guesser. I just tremble every time you leave camp for a minute for fear some goose of a hired girl and her beau wander down here. How should I know whether the young man were the girl's steady, her brother, or her uncle?"

“Easiest thing in the world,” replied Colinette softly. “Listen now. Take a lesson in gipsying from Old Moll in case you should be caught alone some time and be forced to tell a fortune or two in order to keep good our contract with Lovell. Remember, we promised to take care of his customers.

“In the first place, brothers and sisters don’t negotiate such a road as that out yonder to get their fortunes told. If a chap and a girl come out together, the chap is the girl’s lover, or at least a prospect, as agents say. It will be easy to tell how much in love with the man the girl is, or how much her affection is returned. Take the girl’s hand solemnly and tell her she has a lover. If they both giggle, you’ve got ’em there before you. If the girl alone giggles, and the man looks sulky and tries to hide it, then you know that the lover is back in Lovejoy or Cambria, and that this man is an interloper. Under such conditions it will be safer to predict that the girl will change her mind in regard to her present sweetheart and take up with one who is truer and better and more to be depended on all the way around.

“If you see a bunch of girls coming across the pasture without any young men in the party, the best way is to sit in the door of my tent down there by the brook’s edge and sharpen your ears. Every mortal girl will give away either her own

or her friend's love secrets before they reach the gipsy camp. Makes easy sledding for the sooth-sayer. Even you, Aunt Susan, could manage such a case."

Mrs. Dunlap threw out protesting hands, disclaiming any ability whatever.

"If the girl is around or under sixteen, tell her that she is in love with someone who, at times, wears a uniform. Describe a baseball suit as if you never saw one aside from those in your victim's palm. If you like the girl and wish to please her, tell her the young chap in the white pants and pie skullcap is in love with her although too bashful to own it. If a girl is plain, twenty-nine and anxious-looking, predict a lover and happier days—always. Ten to one you will be hitting it that way, and if you are not, it will give her a few hopeful moments anyhow.

"You can almost always tell a jealous woman who has come to the gipsies for help, or to find out the worst."

Colinette slipped a stained, slender hand into the velvet pouch and brought forth a little bag. She poured a portion of its contents into her palm, gazing upon it with all the tender earnestness of an inventive wizard.

"What's that?" demanded Willie, catching the tips of her fingers and dragging the powder within reach of his nose.

"That," Colinette informed him, "is a love potion. Don't sniff up any of it, Willie. If you should get the least little bit of that in your throat, so that it would eventually reach your stomach, you would be dead in love with the girl from whose hand you receive it. Wouldn't that be awful?"

Willie laughed recklessly, and made as if to lap up some of the powder with his tongue, but Colinette jerked her hand away and spilt the powder on the ground. As she did so she looked straight into her Cousin Susan's eyes and caught there a glance of seething jealousy which Susan tried, too late, to suppress.

"That powder," Colinette went on, "is especially designed for flirtatious husbands. In cases of that sort I prescribe a heavy dose—say a heaping tablespoonful. The effect is simply miraculous. It upsets the patient's digestive system entirely for a time, makes him forget the light that lies in woman's eyes and long for the tender ministrations of a loving and faithful wife, the quiet and seclusion of home and his own dressing gown and slippers."

"It wouldn't do me much good to fall in love with any girl just now," joked Willie, "I couldn't get her to love me back—not with all these whiskers round my chops. I hate these whiskers, Colinette. How long are you going to make

me go without a good clean shave and a haircut?"

"As long as we are in the gipsy business. When Jack Lovell's wife recovers and he comes back, we'll all wash, comb up and go home."

"Yes," owned Mrs. Dunlap, "I feel real anxious about Luther and Elmer. I do wonder how they are getting along with their meals. They are such helpless hands around a cook-stove. I do so hope that mother or Rinthy will see to it that they don't starve."

"But you aren't out here to worry about Elmer," Susan reminded her mother crossly, "you're here to rest and recruit and have a good time. Now you just keep busy at it."

"Oh I'm having a good time," owned Mrs. Dunlap gratefully, "best I ever had in my life."

"You're getting as fat as a little pig," triumphed Willie.

"I believe I am," owned Mrs. Dunlap sheepishly.

She finished packing the dishes into a basket to be carried around behind the grove to the "kitchen" located beside the spring. Colinette stood up and brushed the crumbs from her lap. From force of habit her eyes wandered across the pasture to the faraway roadside, where they lingered with a sudden startled expression. She disappeared inside the van and presently the black rims

of a pair of field glasses projected themselves from the small window which looked toward the road. A moment later she was back at the camp fire hastily adjusting her black wig and red handkerchief.

"Then you have given up washing your hair?" asked Susan.

"Yes, unless you want to tell fortunes for that motor full of folks which has just stopped at the fence."

"Well, I don't. While you are doing them, Willie and I will do the dishes—"

"No, Sue, let your mother help with the dishes tonight, and keep her back in the kitchen until these folks are gone. Mind, keep her there! Don't show up, either one of you, until I send or come for you. I want Willie to stay here in front with me. I'm—afraid of this crowd that is coming. Look! They are going to drive right down, the gumps! They'll be here in a moment—do as I tell you, Sue, and hurry!"

Susan's lip curled in unbelief. "Something new for Gipsy Moll to be afraid, isn't it? But it makes a good excuse to keep your sweetheart with you. I don't blame you—"

Colinette cut her short. "Yes—yes, of course. I'll send Willie after you when—the blow is over. But don't show up until I do, mind!"

"Don't worry. Ma and I will stay around at

the kitchen all night if you tell us to. It's up to us to do the right thing for you always—"

"Of course! Now skip! Make a rustling movement to be gone and take Aunt Susan with you! Willie, come here, I want to tell you something! Hurry!"

Willie handed the basket over to Mrs. Dunlap, but Susan paused for a parting shot.

"We've had a good and exciting time out here playing gipsy, but I'm about ready to break camp and go home to my millinery store. I'm about sick of—hanging around the edges and watching other people make love—"

"Yes—yes, will you go along and get Aunt Susan behind the grove and keep her there?" Colinette was really showing symptoms of unwonted excitement. Her eyes had lost their violet tint and showed black, as a gipsy's eyes should.

The approaching car had already accomplished the half of its perilous journey across the pasture, its occupants wholly taken up with the dangers of the passage.

"Willie," hissed Colinette tragically, "cast your eyes at that bunch, and then scurry up and begin to gather wood at the edge of the grove. Let your whiskers show as much as you can without turning your full face to 'em! Keep stooped over and look about forty. Leave the rest to me!"

XVI

LEFT to herself, "Gipsy Moll" took a box of dark powder from her pouch and swabbed it thickly upon her face and hands, surveying the effect, more or less desperately, in a little pocket mirror.

"Afraid I've bitten off more than I can masticate," she murmured, "but, however, I'm in for it." She retired as much as possible underneath her red headdress, pulling it down to her heavily blackened brows. She was encouraged by the fact that the dusk of coming night was already upon the pasture.

In the back seat of the car, which had come to a halt on the far side of the stream, Aunt Rinthy Pickens was scolding even while she smiled.

"I told you, Waldo, not to try to drive your car in here unless you wanted to break it all to pieces. Now you see how it is. Seems queer you'll never take my advice—"

"Well, you would come over here to have your fortune told, so here you be!"

"Well, if I ain't mistaken, you'll never be able to git this car out of here unless some of these men will help you to pry it out—" She directed her gaze to the gloomy edge of the grove where

a moment before she had imagined she had seen the figure of an old gipsy man at work. The figure was no longer there, nor did it appear again during the visit.

Mrs. Pickens walked the plank with some trepidation. In the door of the tent stood the gipsy awaiting her visitors. Luther Dunlap got out of the car stiffly.

"You go on with your fortune tellin', Rinthy," he called after his sister, "and we'll see what we can do towards gittin' the car out an' turned round. And hurry, too; we must git back to the road before dark."

The gipsy brought a camp chair from the tent and Mrs. Pickens sat down, facing the fire.

"Are you the fortune teller?" asked Mrs. Pickens.

The gipsy nodded.

"Wha' d'yeh charge?"

"One dollar."

"Ridiculous! I won't give it."

"Suit yourself, ma'm."

"I don't want my whole fortune told anyway; I just want to find out one thing: How much would you charge for tellin' me where—"

"Hey!" called her husband from the car, "have a little sense. If she's a fortune teller and knows the past an' future, she can tell what you're after without any hints from you. You give her the

dollar an' let her start in. If she can't tell what brought you here and why, then she can't tell nothin', and we'll drive to Lovejoy an' have her arrested for an impostor. I had a gang of gipsies arrested once for just that same business—tryin' to milk money out of the public by makin' believe they knew things they didn't know anything about."

"You hear what my husband says?" demanded Aunt Rinthy with her flattest smile, "he means it, too."

"Is you 'usband used to bossin' men? Runs a factory or some such?"

"No, but he owns a big farm right on the edge of a—"

"There you go agin," called Waldo Pickens, and crossed the plank bridge to steady his wife in getting her dollar's worth. "Now you just do the pumpin' yourself, an' let her do the answerin'." He turned to the gipsy. "Don't make any difference what I am, or what she is; you go ahead an' tell what you know and be in a hurry about it, for I want to git my car back to the road before it gits much darker."

"You better take the car out to the road and leave me an' Luther to walk over the pasture," suggested Aunt Rinthy. But Waldo was not willing to lose the chance of "ballyragging" the gipsy. The gipsy took Aunt Rinthy's hand:

"You live in the edge of a small town—"

"There, you see?" chuckled Pickens, "I told you so. That's the way they do it; they pick out of you everything you know, and then sell it back to you at a dollar per. Makes me sick! Here, git out of the way, Rinthy. Let her tell my fortune, and if she don't do it up in style, I'll see what a justice of the peace can do about it."

The gipsy relinquished Mrs. Pickens' palm and bent above her husband's.

"You've been a farmer," she began.

"Oh, tell me something I don't know." Waldo Pickens was beginning to enjoy himself thoroughly. He decided that he "had the gipsy on the run."

"You 'ad a rawther nice 'ouse, painted white, three windahs an' a door in front, shedroom on the side, barn be'ind—"

Waldo made an impatient gesture.

"You was about to say you know all this, an' I dare say you do, but do you know that your 'ouse burned to the ground three days ago; that in tryin' to save 'er piano your only child broke 'er leg—"

Aunt Rinthy uttered a squeal of dismay. Her flat smile was ironed out into a look of horror. "Why Waldo, Waldo," she cried, "she may be tellin' the truth!"

"Keep still, can't yeh!" Waldo's own palm shook in the gipsy's grasp.

"Mind now, I didn't say it is so," said the gipsy, "I asked if you knew it was so. Maybe it isn't so bad, and—any'ow, I ain't got to what you come for yet. Besides that nice 'ouse, an' the barn with the 'ip roof at the back of it, you've lost a sister an' two beautiful nieces—"

"I shouldn't call 'em so beautiful," snapped Aunt Rinthy savagely. "An' one of 'em is no relation to us, a tall—not the least in the world. Come, Waldo, I want to git home as fast as that old cart of your'n will take us—"

"Don't 'urry," soothed the gipsy. "An old lidy, some connection of yours—is takin' care of your daughter 'Elen. About the errand that brought you 'ere: You might as well give up lookin' for the crowd that is lost, for circumstances has changed 'em so you wouldn't know 'em if you was to bump right up against 'em—"

"Has somethin' happened 'em?" demanded Waldo hopefully, with a commiserating glance across his shoulder at the unconscious Luther in the car on the other side of the stream. If Helen had broken her leg, and the Pickens' house and barn were in ashes, he could not suppress a thrill of gratification that Luther was to suffer also. But the gipsy relinquished his palm and shook her head.

"I ain't tellin' their fortunes; if you want that, you'd 'ave to cross me 'and with another dollar."

Rinthy and Waldo snorted in concert at the idea and prepared to go.

"Do you own that automobile house?" asked Aunt Rinthy, indicating the van.

"No m'am; Jipsy Jack, as they calls 'im, owns the van. 'Is wife is very sick an' we don't know w'at is the matter with 'er—"

Aunt Rinthy gave a sudden forward movement in the direction of the river. She was followed closely by Waldo. As they stubbed across the plank walk where Waldo waited in their car, Aunt Rinthy audibly expressed her opinion of gipsies as a class.

Colinette stood watching the load through the gap at the main road. The gipsy man stole from the shadows of the grove and came down to her side.

"Think they suspected?" he inquired cautiously.

"I thought so at first. It didn't seem possible that they should not know me, but as I went on with the fortune—"

"I'll bet it was a peach of a fortune," chuckled Willie.

"I told them no lies," protested Colinette. "They were very impolite to me before I—stirred them up in the least. Then I asked if they knew

that their house had burned down. Of course they could not know what had not happened, but—well, they seemed disturbed, and I think—I am almost sure—that they will be going right home. No, Willie, I did not lie to them, and yet—I'm not happy with the evening's work. Sit down here on the bank a moment; I want to ask you something: Why is it that I am always trying to do good and yet always do—the opposite? You know, Willie, that I started out on this expedition with the best intentions in the world, now don't you?"

"You bet," owned Willie.

"It was not my intention to cheat, lie, steal or commit murder; and yet I have already approached the first three mentioned crimes, and who knows how near I am to the fourth and greatest?"

"Awh, come off, Colinette," soothed Willie. "You haven't lied nor stolen nor cheated. You're a little brick, and quick as lightning. If the rest of us were only smart enough to play up to you we wouldn't always be in a muddle. You go ahead and do things, but we hang back and—"

"Willie," broke in Colinette, "if you feel that way about it—that is, that I've been doing the greater part of the work in this scheme of ours, why don't you—sort of—do your part as we

planned? Why don't you get yourself engaged all nice and comfy so that we may slide back into civilization once more?"

"Because," said Willie sulkily, "no man could make successful love from behind such a bunch of spinach as this!" He stroked his beard with a tragic hand. "You insist on my wearing 'em—"

"They are really necessary to your part—"

"They may be all right for a gipsy's disguise, but they're darned poor trimming for a lover."

"But what, for instance, would you have done this evening without your whiskers?" persisted Colinette. "Uncle Waldo Pickens would have sung out, 'hello, Willie Klatz, you're the chap we are out after!' and the fat would all have been in the fire."

"I thought it was going into the fire anyhow when the two old guys began to groan about their machine being stalled. Did you notice a big gipsy fade away?"

"I was glad you did. I could see how we would have gone to wreck if they had got a close-up of you. You will be obliged to go after supplies tomorrow—we are out of potatoes and baking-powder—and if you feel so embarrassed by your whiskers, Willie, get 'em pruned. You might as well. I hardly think anyone else will

come tracking us down. In fact, if you count up you will find that our stipulated time is about up and Jack Lovell may be expected to drop in on us any moment now. I want to get away before we are found out. After my success as a fortune teller I wish always to remain the gipsy in the minds of those whom I have deceived. Go round to the kitchen now, Willie, and gather in the Susans, Aunt Susan will be wanting to go to bed. This outdoor life makes her sleepy quite early in the evening.

“While I get Aunt Susan to bed you take a stroll with Sue along the river bank and explain what has happened this evening. She’ll be surprised, I’ll warrant.”

When Willie returned with the Susans a cosy gleam of candlelight streamed from the door and small windows of the van. Colinette from the steps reached a hand to her aunt, but Willie drew Susan away in the direction of the river.

“But now?” asked Susan morosely. She was in low spirits; angry at Colinette for ordering her mother and her to the kitchen and keeping them there so long; angry at Willie for staying at the van with Colinette instead of coming back and helping with the dishes, but more angry at herself for caring. Was it not enough that she should have suffered all summer through jealousy of Colinette and Jeff, without now beginning

afresh on a campaign of jealousy of Colinette and Willie Klatz?

On the other hand, what right had Colinette to fall in love with Willie Klatz? Or what right had Willie Klatz to forget his old admiration for Susan in love for Colinette?

Since they had been playing gipsy there had been moments when Susan almost felt sure that if she were a mind she might— But she had not followed up the lead. It was not her place to be treacherous even if Colinette was, and so she walked beside Willie on the banks of the river patting herself on the back, figuratively speaking, for her uprightness of conduct.

“Did you wonder what made Colinette order you and your mother to go to the kitchen and stay till she called you tonight?” asked Willie.

“Oh no, I wonder she hasn’t done it before,” said Susan calmly. “Ma and I are always sticking round in the way. But we can’t help it.”

“You are never in my way, Susan,” said Willie with sudden fervor, and drew Susan’s arm tightly within his own.

Susan was thrilled. There was something wonderfully pleasant in that tight, supporting grip which Willie had taken upon her arm. They walked on in silence when suddenly the full moon came up in the east, red and round and as big as a cartwheel. Across the stream they could hear

the soft rustle of the Bennet sheep where they clumped together in repose. To the west the dim hulk of the van showed with the light streaming from its door, and the dull glow of the fading camp fire with its thin ribbon of smoke reaching up into the air.

"Isn't it lovely!" murmured Susan, feeling for the first the full joy of wild life.

"Corking!" owned Willie. "I like it out here."

"So do I," said Susan. "And it's doing ma a world of good."

"You bet it is. Let's stay here till snow flies."

Susan giggled. "What about Gipsy Jack?"

"He'll stand pat so long as Colinette gathers in the sheckles the way she's been doing. Pretty big rent for a weatherbeaten old scow like that."

The mention of her cousin's name brought Susan back to earth. This was Colinette's lover, not her own, with whom she was standing out here under the moon. "We must go back," she reminded him. "They will wonder what has become of us."

"Don't go yet. The moon is wonderful. Let's stay and enjoy it a few minutes. Besides, I brought you out here to tell you something—a secret."

Now she knew what was coming; Willie would tell her that Colinette had promised to marry him. She felt faint. Oh, how was she

to stand it—to have Willie and Colinette married and she left out in the cold! She had an impulse to run forward and throw herself into the stream and make Willie wade in and save her. But she did not; she merely stood like a stone post in Bennet's pasture waiting for Willie to hit her on the head with his news.

"How do you like these whiskers of mine?" asked Willie suddenly.

"I don't like the looks of them very well," owned Susan, thrown completely from her height of tragic emotion by such a silly question.

"Then I wonder if you'd like the feel of them," said Willie, and the next moment Susan was smothered in such an embrace and by such a kiss as she had never experienced before.

She pushed him from her with both hands. Willie let her go. "Well," he said complacently, "I've always wanted to kiss you, and now I have, and, as Ella Wheeler Wilcox says in one of her poems, nothing in heaven or earth can take that kiss away from me—undo it, you know; or un-kiss it, so to speak. No matter what you say or do, I've got that to remember."

"It was horrible!" stormed Susan.

"I suppose it was," owned Willie contritely. "You must have felt as if your face was being mopped. I wish you'd let me try it without whiskers, Susan. I'm going to town tomorrow

to unload 'em. Colinette says I may. I never should have let 'em grow if she hadn't commanded me to. But having been in the army I know enough to obey my captain's orders."

"You seem to have forgotten your wonderful news," Susan reminded him sternly, and braced herself for his reply.

"That's so, I had. But do you wonder, when such a nice thing happened to me—"

"Oh, stop your blarney and go on with the news."

"Well then, it is this: that load of folks were the Pickenses and your stepfather, Luther Dunlap, out to consult the gipsy about where to find something that they have mislaid. Colinette knew them before they broke away from the highway over yonder, and she knew the jig was up if your mother recognized them. She didn't have much time to make arrangements, so she ordered a double quick to the rear for the Susans, and me to play support, while she occupied the front trenches herself and scored a complete victory.

"Honest to goodness, Sus, isn't that little green-eyed gipsy a corker?"

XVII

IN the morning Susan insisted upon doing the kitchen work alone. The reason for this was partly her fear of betraying the secret of her stepfather's visit. She was aware of her weakness in the matter of keeping secrets. She wished, also, for solitude and a chance to mull over that moonlight happening down by the river. That kiss of Willie's had taken her very much by surprise. She was puzzled by his action and still more by her own attitude of mind. Was it possible for a girl to be in love with two men at the same time? She decided that it was not, at least to anybody with the least mental pabulum. Colinette had left everything to bring her out here to recover from the Jeff Plummer tragedy, and in the twinkling of an eye she was tingling at the kiss of another, and that other the man whom Colinette had evidently settled on for herself.

Colinette had no right to fall in love with Willie Klatz. He was not her kind. Willie liked homely, simple things and homely simple ways, while Colinette was—why—complicated, mysterious, not easily understood. And yet, Susan re-

membered, Colinette had always liked Willie away back in high school days.

Poor little cousin Colinette! Susan knew that in those old misty, musty, long-gone high school days Willie had cared a great deal for Susan Dunlap. She thought again of last night and wondered if it were possible that something of the old affection for herself were reviving in Willie's heart.

She would not be mean enough to try to revive it. No indeed. Poor little Colinette! And yet—that moment last night by the river—

What was it that he had said last night while the moon rose—that he had always wanted to kiss her, and that now he had kissed her? How could he feel proud of having kissed Susan while he was pledged to Colinette?

Was he pledged to Colinette? Colinette had as good as confessed her love for him, but because a girl loves a man is no reason why the man is bound to love that particular girl. And yet, Willie had called Colinette his captain, and confessed that he found it best to follow her leadership. It was a complicated affair any way one looked at it.

One truth stood out clear in Susan's mind and that was that Willie's kiss had been a long way from disagreeable, and she could remember a time when it would have been so. But Willie

had changed completely since then. Then he was Uncle Waldo Pickens' hired man; now he was Lieutenant Klatz—an accredited war hero. Oh, why hadn't she, like Colinette, been sharp enough to see the sterling qualities in the hired man which were so apparent in the lieutenant!

What a romantic feeling the moon always gave a girl when it came up as it had last night big and red and round, especially a girl who had recently been cruelly jilted by one man, and was walking out with another girl's sweetheart. Willie had spoken of the beauty of the moon, and of the charm of the gurgling little river, lipping the grasses at its margin. He had called the sound of the water, "a nice lonesome sound."

Susan was having such a nice time washing dishes and thinking over all these things that she quite resented Colinette's intrusion into the kitchen and her offer of help.

"I don't need any help," Susan told her petulantly. "What's the matter with the fortune-telling business? Is it falling off?"

"Too warm for them to travel out here, I'm thinking," said Colinette. "It's too warm for this wig at least." She shed her brunette identity, as was her wont in the privacy of the kitchen, and curled up in the rocking-chair which had been established here for Mrs. Dunlap's comfort.

"They'd be astonished to see you now," said Susan, referring to Colinette's patrons.

"They're not likely to see me; Aunt Susan is standing guard down by the bridge. A crowd of boys have been hanging about all morning, but there have been no other visitors. I am glad. I am about at the end of my infinite variety. I am sure I told that last girl the identical fortune that I spooned out to the one who came just before. Time to strike camp and throw up the gipsy business. Aren't you tired of it?"

"No," said Susan with a reminiscent smile, "I'm just getting used to it—now. Besides we can't go, can we, until Jack Lovell comes back?"

"I have a hunch that Jack will be coming soon."

"Oh, I hope not," sighed Susan. "I hate to go home just now. You can't imagine what this picnicing out here has done for me. I feel so much better. And I think ma feels—and looks—like another woman."

"I do think it has done wonders for Aunt Susan," agreed Colinette, brightening. "Do you know, Willie and I have hatched up a scheme—('Willie and I!' Susan resented the phrase). We are going to persuade Aunt Susan to go over to Cambria and be fitted for a set of upper teeth. We talked it over this morning—"

"Who talked it over?"

"Willie, your mother and I, before Willie started for town."

"Willie has gone, then?"

"Yes, and he will bring the car out and take your mother over to Cambria this afternoon. The ride and the change will do her good and the teeth will surely do her good after she gets them. Willie can bring our supplies back in the car in place of packing them as usual. He says, too, that he just must have a good clean shave and a haircut. He says that his beard is demoralizing him; that he begins to have a hankering to cheat somebody in a horse trade, or to steal a dog. But he is mistaken; nothing could demoralize Willie Klatz. He's a prince."

"Not a prince, merely a lieutenant," said Susan, and added hastily, "I'm going to bake a pie for supper."

"I'll build you a fire," said Colinette, and went about it.

The smoke rolled pungently from the pipe of the rusty old stove which was used to relieve some of the culinary strain from the more picturesque camp fire in front.

Mrs. Dunlap appeared all in a twitter of excitement.

"I've told a fortune!" she announced.

"Why ma!" "Why Aunt Susan!" exclaimed the girls in chorus.

"Tell us about it," demanded Colinette. "I'm jealous! Stealing my profession!"

"I really had to. I told her the regular fortune teller wasn't here. She was awful sorry because this was the only time she could get away to come out to the camp. I told her, if that was the case, I'd do the best I could for her, but that I wasn't much of a teller—just a makeshift. She sat down and told me all about her husband, how mean and overbearing he was, and how selfish about loading all the work off on to her, and never giving her any credit for anything. I told her to stand it as long as she could, but when he got too bad, just to tell him what was what, and warn him that if he didn't change his ways she'd leave him and never come back."

"Good," said Colinette, "that's exactly what I should have advised her to do—what I should advise any abused wife to do, Aunt Susan."

Young Susan giggled.

"I told her his name was John—"

"How did you know his name was John?" asked Susan.

"She accidentally mentioned his name when she first came. I told her she had children—she had mentioned that, too, but had forgotten about it and was just dumbfounded when I spoke about her children. She said if the regular gipsy was

any more wonderful than I was she must be a regular prophet."

"It's easy," smiled Colinette, "people like to be fooled."

"She asked me if I had any children. I told her yes, one real and two step. She asked me where they all were and I hemmed and hawed and told her I didn't just know where the two steps were—which is true, Elmer may be off again with Jeff Plummer—that is—he may be off hunting again somewhere—"

"It's a safe bet," said Colinette.

"She said her feet hurt something awful—stumbling over that rough pasture road—and so I gave her them old shoes of mine—"

"Oh—oh," quavered Colinette, "that was wrong, Aunt Susan; you stepped out of your part. A gipsy, according to my experience, takes, but never gives." She put on her wig and handkerchief, remembering the unguarded condition out at the bridge.

Willie arrived, clean shaven, his hair cut, and with nothing of the gipsy remaining about him. He was becomingly excited. Susan's heart throbbed in sudden admiration.

"Well what do you think!" exclaimed Willie, "we can't get our car. Somebody has been to Hank Jensen and told him it was a stolen car—two young chaps from Redmoon, Jensen says,

told him to hang on to the car for a while until the rightful owner turned up. Told him, anyhow, to wait until he heard from them again. Ain't it the limit!" Willie slapped his knee and chortled his appreciation of the situation. He threw himself on the grass still laughing.

"Ain't it the limit, Colinette? Just like a game. We beat 'em two or three points when we ran across this chance to rent a prairie boathouse of Gipsy Jack—we thought we were awful smart. But up jumps Elmer and Jeff Plummer and checks us by tying up our means of transportation."

"Dear, dear," murmured Aunt Susan, "they must have passed along the main road over yonder—seen our camp fire, even, and never dreamed they had us right under their thumbs."

"If they were to see you now they'd know you, Willie," said Colinette.

"Of course they would know any of you," said Mrs. Dunlap. "Your gipsy rigs would fool strangers, but not anybody from Redmoon." She was quite bewildered by the sudden gust of laughter which swept about her. But these three often laughed at jokes she could not see.

"What shall you do about the car?" asked Mrs. Dunlap.

"Go down after Hank Jensen has gone home, pry open the garage door and take my car," said

Willie. "I don't propose to let Elmer and Jeff Plummer dictate when I am to use a car that I'm paying a hundred dollars a month for and furnishing my own gas. I brought the baking-powder and a few spuds along, but I cached the rest of the stuff at the roadside just a little way out of town where I can pop it into the car as I drive along tonight."

"That's right," commented Colinette, "'If You Want a Thing, Go After It.' My own motto."

"You bet!" said Willie, "especially if it's something that belongs to you anyway."

"But that clause isn't a part of Colinette's motto," Susan reminded them somewhat vindictively.

"That's a corking pie, Susan; is it for dinner, or must we wait for it until supper?" inquired Willie.

"We shall have it for dinner," Susan promised, and slipped it into the oven, smiling up at him as she did so. "The rest of you go round in front and set out the dishes; I'll tend the pie."

Mrs. Dunlap and Colinette obeyed, but Willie lingered.

"I'm sorry about this mixup with the car because it will keep us from taking that stroll to-night," he told Susan.

"What stroll?"

"The stroll you promised to take with me down

by the river where we strolled last night. We must go before the moon gets old."

"But Colinette—"

"Oh, Colinette won't care."

"You think there is no danger of Colinette's being jealous of a—big homely thing like me, I suppose?"

"You are not any too big, and you are not homely," replied Willie soberly, "but just the same, Colinette will not be jealous if we walk out under the moon. Colinette isn't of a jealous disposition."

"Of course—I know, Colinette is perfection."

"Let's not talk about Colinette," begged Willie, "let's talk about ourselves."

"I don't know what there can be to say about ourselves."

"Come over and sit down in your mother's chair." Susan complied, and Willie dragged out the washbench and sat down on it in front of her.

"Did you ever think, Sus, how the existence of one person makes a difference with all the other persons around?"

"What are you getting at, Willie?"

"Take Colinette, for instance—just for instance, you understand, because in that respect I don't suppose she is any different from the rest of us—"

"I thought we weren't going to talk about Colinette."

"Well, you thought there wasn't anything interesting to say about yourself or me, so I fell back on Colinette."

"She is always interesting, of course."

"Yes," agreed Willie, "she is always interesting because she is so different."

"And I'm like a million others."

"To me you are different from anybody else in the world."

Susan's cheeks and ears were very red. It seemed to her that this was almost making love—almost, not quite. This was altogether different, of course, from the way Jeff Plummer made love.

"As I said," went on Willie, "take Colinette. Suppose Colinette wasn't alive—never had been alive?"

"If Colinette had never lived in Redmoon, I should have married Jeff Plummer," said Susan in sudden passion.

"I don't believe you would."

"Why not?"

"Because if it hadn't been for Colinette you wouldn't have been a milliner at all—all dressed up and good-looking every day; you would have been Aunt Rinthy Pickens' hired girl, with red hands and no soft clothes, and Jeff never would have seen you. Some fellow who liked you in

spite of your clothes—for yourself alone—would have got you. Some Rube with no style himself, see? Me, like enough.”

Susan stared at him a moment and then burst into tears. Willie took both her hands in his own in a clasp so fervent that it hurt.

“Sue, Sue,” he trembled, “if there wasn’t any Colinette in the world to stand between us, could you—could you have—”

“Oh my sakes alive and more too!” exclaimed a voice of distress behind Willie, and the guilty pair flew apart, overturning the rocker in their haste.

It was Mrs. Dunlap with her head in the oven from which a murky smoke rolled forth; a smoke laden with the odor of frizzled piecrust and burned sugar. She dragged forth the ruin, and her face was tragic.

“I told Colinette I smelt it burning, but she stuck to it that Susan knew enough to make a pie. She wouldn’t come, so I did, but—a little too late!”

“A little too early!” muttered Willie, while Susan turned her back to wipe her eyes and gain some measure of composure.

XVIII

CAPTAIN BRACKLEY was frankly hunting for somebody, and was puzzled and disappointed at not having found a trace of the party which he trailed. He had driven through Cambria a half dozen times; he had been gased and oiled and re-tired at the only public garage in Lovejoy so many times that Hank Jensen was coming to regard him as a regular customer. He had coyly inquired about a certain car which seemed to have found a permanent home under Mr. Jensen's garage roof until Mr. Jensen had intimated in a rather surly manner that the wherefore of that car, its presence in his garage, and the probable length of its stay was none of his business. He had scoured all roads, eaten at many hotels, always beating back to Lovejoy and that mysterious car as the only tangible sign of the presence on earth of those he sought. His lack of success really bewildered him.

Under cover of night, he had even revisited Redmoon. He did not care to set the town talking, or to gratify the other two bands of searchers by the knowledge that he, too, had joined their ranks, and like them, had been unsuccessful.

He arrived at Redmoon shortly after eleven o'clock and had gone directly to Mrs. Gard's house where, after much judicious knocking he succeeded in gaining admittance without rousing the neighborhood.

He had hoped to find the wanderers returned, but Mrs. Gard informed him that the only ones who had returned were the searchers. The Pickenses had come rushing home because a gipsy had warned them that their house had burned up.

"And it served 'em right for havin' anything to do with disreputable folks like gipsies," Grandmother Gard thought.

Luther Dunlap was talking darkly of getting a divorce from Susan on the grounds of desertion. Later Jeff Plummer and Elmer had arrived firm in the belief that something dire had happened to the Willie Klatz party.

Mrs. Gard, now thoroughly alarmed herself, had begged Neal to continue the search until he found some trace of the lost ones, and Neal had promised to do his best.

And he had done his best, but so far without success. He was slowly wheeling out of the village of Lovejoy once more, quite late in the evening, moodily wondering what direction to take, when he became aware that a traveler had stepped out of the road to let him pass.

There was nothing remarkable about the in-

cident except that the man had left the road so long before the car reached him as if anxious to avoid the illumination of the headlights. In fact, he had been but a shadow flitting to the north side of the road, yet when Neal arrived at the point where the lights should have revealed the person, there was no person visible.

Under ordinary circumstances Neal would have thought no more of the matter, but the enterprise he was just now engaged in had aroused the sleuth within him, so he drove his car to the side of the road into the extinguishing shadows of a group of trees, locked it, extinguished his lights and walked back to investigate.

Another car flashed by revealing an empty road. The man ahead was certainly dodging headlights. Neal walked rapidly on and presently heard the soft, regular thud of the man's footsteps in front of him. Easy enough now to follow him to his destination in the village.

The man in front stood still. Neal was perilously near him before he realized this. The man was covering something at the roadside with brush. Easy enough to guess what—loot, which would shortly be picked up by a confederate in a car and whisked away to safety. Presently the prowler resumed his tramp in the direction of Lovejoy, Captain Brackley at his heels.

It was getting late. Lovejoy had been abed an

hour at least. In another hour the moon would rise full, round, and betraying. The prowler walked straight to Jensen's garage and began to fumble with the lock. It was plain that the man had no key to the garage, and therefore no legitimate business inside of it.

Neal walked across the road and focused an electric torch upon the burglar. The man looked calmly over his shoulder and their eyes met. Neal's heart nearly leaped out of his mouth as he beheld the undisturbed features of Willie Klatz.

Willie was the first to recover his presence of mind.

"Well, Brother of the Night!" he exclaimed, using the old greeting of the "Bat Club" of which they had both been accredited members in high school days. Their hands met in a hearty clasp of friendship—the pursuer and the pursued.

It was a surprise to Neal that Willie actually seemed glad to see him; a not altogether pleasant surprise. If Willie were still in doubt as to his standing with Colinette he would not welcome a possible rival so heartily. But if everything were settled between them—the thought gave Captain Brackley a sharp twinge in the region of the heart. It may have added a touch of asperity to his question:

"Where are you staying?"

"That's telling," answered Willie.

"But why shouldn't you tell me, Willie?"

"Because I've promised not to tell until—I get my orders."

"Orders from whom?"

"From the person I'm working for."

"Well, now that I've had the good luck to run across you, it isn't going to be hard to locate the rest of the gang, I should imagine."

"It may be harder than you imagine," said Willie, "for I mean to sit right here in front of this garage door until Jensen comes to work in the morning."

He proceeded to arrange a tottering throne of two discarded automobile tires, a box and a short piece of plank.

"I'll stay with you," said Neal, "move over." Willie did so, and Neal seated himself upon the opposite end of the plank.

"This is nice and friendly," chuckled Willie. "But do you know what will happen when Jensen comes and catches us here? He will have us both arrested for breaking into his garage. I had his old lock about chewed off when you turned up and spoilt my game."

"What's the idea of your breaking into another man's property, Willie?"

"He's got my car stabled in there and he won't let me have it."

"Owe him something on repairs?"

"No, somebody told him it was a stolen car and he's holding it for future developments."

A bit of diplomacy occurred to Willie. "How would you like to travel fifty miles or so after a car which belonged to you, and then not be allowed to take it out because a couple of bruisers had lied about its being a stolen car?"

"But doesn't the garage owner remember that you left the car with him?"

"There's where all the trouble comes in, I didn't leave the car with him; another chap left the car, and Jensen is waiting patiently for that other chap to put in an appearance."

"Why don't you get in touch with the other fellow?"

"That isn't easy—just now. I shall, of course, in time. But meanwhile I need that car. I don't want to hoof it back over those fifty or sixty miles—"

"No need of that, Willie; I have a good car right handy; I'll take you—"

"Sorry, Neal, but I can't accept your friendly offer— Say, what brought you out here anyhow? Seems funny that all creation has to come wheeling about the country after a party which started out for a quiet picnic all by its lone."

"I am searching for a certain golden-haired girl—"

"You needn't follow me then; no golden-haired

girl around my tepee—nothing but black-haired damsels where I hang out. Honest; black as a crow's wing."

"That is interesting, Willie. Can you by any possibility recall a mutual friend of ours, known in 'Bat' circles as 'The Green-eyed One'?"

"Seems to me I faintly recall such a person," replied Willie.

"And can you by any stretch of memory hear her voice across the intervening years—a pleasant voice, and very earnest and convincing when it wished to be—can you hear it announcing its owner's motto, which was: 'When You Want a Thing, Go After it'? It's a good motto. I have adopted it for my own. I'll be honest with you, Willie; I want, above everything else in this world, an hour's chat with that same golden-haired young woman—and I'm going after it."

"All right," said Willie, "but I've already told you that I can't help you. Good-by." He rose with a jerk, purposely upsetting the shaky seat, and while Captain Brackley sprawled upon the ground, disappeared between the garage and a shed which flanked it on the east.

In the confusion of his fall Neal lost track of Willie entirely. However, he sprang to his feet and plunged into the vagueness of indeterminate alleys and untidy back yards, running hither and thither without much plan and with no success.

Village dogs shot out of dark corners and challenged him; henroosts, disturbed in their innocent repose, chattered sleepily as he pounded past; barbed wire reached out cruel thorns for him, and tin cans lay in wait to warn sleeping Lovejoy that something, which did not belong, was loose within its boundaries. Once a dog barked furiously up near the west end of town, and Neal, working on the theory that if dogs barked at him they would also bark at Willie, was about to make a dash to the western confines, when another dog set up a mouthy alarm in the extreme east end.

Neal gave up in despair. He leaned against a board fence and laughed—at himself. He knew that Willie, too, must be laughing at him at that moment. Willie must have caught a fleeting glimpse of him as he lay amid the wreck of that tire throne, legs and arms wildly waving, head and body mostly concealed under defunct rubber. Neal's laughter was brought to an end by a raucus voice.

“Hey, young feller, what you doin' here at this time of night?”

The enquirer barred the captain's progress, and in the light of the newly-risen moon displayed an officer's badge.

“I am looking for a friend,” replied Neal, with all—and more—than his usual politeness.

Here was a complication. If this old blunder-

buss decided to arrest him and clap him into the Lovejoy lockup to await investigation by the authorities, Willie Klatz would laugh himself to death, and with cause.

"Really, I'm giving you straight goods," declared Neal, approaching the belligerent officer.

"Did yeh expect to find your friend in John Grago's henhouse?" demanded the officer of the law with biting sarcasm. "John's had chickens stole before this."

"But not by me," protested Neal. "I don't like chicken. And my dear sir, stop and think a moment; what would I do with chickens?"

"If you're one of them there gipsies that's campin' over in the Bennet pasture—an' yeh may be for all I know—I guess you'd know what to do with chickens."

"I have heard there were gipsies camping somewhere near town, but I have not been to their camp. They are very interesting people—gipsies—don't you think?"

"Can't say as I do. A man in my position has enough to look arfter without havin' a pack of gipsies loaded on to him to keep track of. Though they say they're quieter'n usual this summer. I ain't been out, but my womern's been out—"

"You don't happen to know a young chap by the name of Klatz around here, do you?"

"Huh? Klatz? Dutchman, ain't he? No,

we don't go much on the Dutch out here to Lovejoy—not sence the War. I know a man by the name of Shultz, lives out about two mile—”

“Yes—thank you, but I don't think he will answer my purpose, so, if you don't mind, I think I'll be moving along. My name is Brackley—Captain Neal Brackley, of the 27th, New York. He extended a card which the officer took, looking him up and down meanwhile in the strengthening moonlight. He had already decided that Neal was no gipsy, and therefore no chicken thief. The military title had had its effect upon him, backed by the bearing of the young man himself. He put the card in his pocket without having been able to read it.

“My name is Cummings,” he informed Neal.

“Awfully glad to have met you, Mr. Cummings.” They shook hands. “If you happen to run across Mr. Klatz just tell him that Brackley is looking for him, will you? Captain Brackley. Thank you. Good night.”

Ten minutes later Neal was trudging disconsolately out on the east road in the direction of his car. He half expected to find it missing; it wasn't his lucky night, he had decided.

Suddenly he remembered something; that cache of Willie's on the north side of the road. On the north side of the road Willie had covered something carefully with hazel brush. Where was

that object—or objects? An examination of that cache might throw some light on Willie's mysterious movements.

He scouted carefully along without the aid of his pocket torch, the moon being sufficient now for his purpose, and soon came upon the cut brush, but whatever it had concealed was no longer there.

"Willie has beaten me to it," he muttered, and proceeded to do a little deductive reasoning as to Willie's probable motives in the matter: That cache had contained a bag of provisions, bought earlier in the day with the expectation of having the car convey it to its destination. And Willie would have succeeded in getting the car had it not been for the encounter at the garage. Splendid Willie! While he himself had been skirting chicken-houses and hobnobbing with alley dogs Willie had cantered out here, annexed his loot and gone his way.

But in what direction? Back to Lovejoy, or on to Cambria, or to some spot in the wildwood where he had concealed the Dunlaps and Colinette?

The last he decided unlikely. The policeman would have known all about a camping party—any camping party within a radius of ten miles—even as he had known of the gipsies.

Neal found his car undisturbed. He climbed into it and got it upon the road, in doubt whether

to turn back or to go on. He was tired and sleepy, but the hope of ultimately overtaking Willie Klatz kept him moving Cambriaward.

The road was neither straight nor smooth. Rank growth obscured the fences upon either side. If Willie were so minded he could slip out of sight easily enough and keep on laughing as his pursuer bumped past.

Neal began to experience a growing resentment against Willie. If everything were settled between Colinette and him why all this secrecy?

There was the rub! Everything was not settled between Colinette and Willie. Willie was still in doubt as to the state of Colinette's feelings in regard to himself. He had carried her off on this touring expedition for the purpose of having her all to himself. When Neal remembered the effect on a girl's mind of moonlight nights like this, and lonely roads, and green trees, and small dangers overcome, and everlasting propinquity—Splendid Willie! Deep Willie! Neal would have followed the same plan if only fortune had been kind enough to have given him the chance.

But oh, to circumvent Willie! To jar his well-laid plans—upset him figuratively if but temporarily, even as he, Willie, had upset him back there at the garage.

Ahead, his lamps and the moonlight disclosed a scrubby clump of trees by the roadside, and just

in front of them a break in the undergrowth, as though a road turned off blindly into a field.

Neal had not reached this point when a sound came out of the night which crinkled along his nerves like an electric shock; a sound which at that moment, and under the existing circumstances, thrilled him with an almost wicked sense of triumph.

XIX

THE sound which had so startled Neal Brackley was the call of "The Bats"—the high call, as it had been known to the "gang." It was sweet and piercing and yet indefinite enough to pass with the uninitiated as the note of a night bird, and it was produced by an ingenious little whistle used by the leader alone. When it had sounded the call "The Bats" had responded promptly, loyally and silently to the call of the chief.

Neal thrust his car forward into the shadow of the trees and answered the call, as he would have answered it in the old days, as he knew Willie Klatz would answer if he had heard it.

A girl stepped into the open space in the fence. The moonlight revealed her distinctly, and Neal experienced a shock of bitter disappointment. It was not the girl whom he had hoped and expected to see. The hair, straggling from underneath her red headdress was black as tar; she wore great hoops of gold in her ears; she had the swarthy skin, the bizarre dress and the impudent swing of a gipsy—and that, Neal at once decided her to be—but when she spoke, she spoke with the voice of Colinette Gard.

“Willie!” she called out, and there was a note of hurried anxiety in her voice, “Jack Lovell has come. I scuttled down here to meet you and to warn you about the settlement. He insists on making it with you, and I think you had better—”

“Get into the car,” invited Neal in a muffled tone, and without the slightest hesitation the gipsy climbed into the car, saying as she struggled with the door, “so you got it, I see. Did you have any trouble?”

In place of answering, Neal drew her to him suddenly and kissed her straight upon the mouth, then gasped from the blow which took him fairly upon the cheek and for a moment stunned him.

“Are you drunk, or crazy, Willie Klatz?” demanded Colinette, attempting to back out of the car. But Neal held her, while up the road sounded a hail, and Neal plainly saw Willie Klatz approaching, staggering along under a great load and shouting at the top of his voice, “wait, Neal; wait, I’m coming!”

It was Neal’s turn now to laugh. “I see you are, Willie, but you are a minute too late. You remember my motto, ‘If You Want a Thing, Go After It.’ He still held Colinette firmly, but she managed to unfasten the velvet bag from her girdle and cast it at Willie’s feet where he stood in the road gasping after his late sprint.

“The money for Jack Lovell. Don’t let him

gipsy you!" Colinette called back from some distance away, for the car was already in swift motion.

Colinette settled into her corner beside the driver, and the car rolled on. The moon rode high and flooded the land with strong light, bringing out with almost daytime distinctness all the lovely details of the farmhouses, sliding so swiftly rearward, yet hiding the sordidness of their surroundings. The windmills, pigpens and barns shrank into mere interesting outlines, merged and concealed in blobs of darkness which in daylight were groups of oaks, elms, and apple orchards.

"What a lovely world!" reflected Colinette in her still corner, but she said never a word.

Neal, on his part, now that the excitement of the capture was over, became apprehensive at his prisoner's prolonged silence. He had expected upbraidings, possibly pleadings to be taken back and released at that gap in a pasture fence where she had so mysteriously appeared. He cast a sidelong glance at her where she sat, so inexplicably silent—and so changed. He brought his machine to a snail's pace.

"I can hardly believe that you are Colinette—in that rig," he began.

"I am not—in this rig. I am Gipsy Moll. Do you wish to cross my palm with silver and try your fortune?"

"That little palm warned me of good fortune awhile ago without being crossed with either gold or silver," said Neal. "The side of my head rings yet from the slap you gave me. It nearly broke my neck, but—it brought me great happiness. It assured me that you are not—not on kissing terms with Willie Klatz."

"I am not on kissing terms with anybody, and when I am, it shall not be with a person who kisses me against my will."

"Forgive me, Colinette, please! And besides, it isn't the first time I have kissed you. Don't you remember the night in—I think it was Joliet—when we were on the road with the show, the house was still ringing with applause, when I left the piano and went to the back. You had just kissed Rosey, the doll star; you insisted on your grandmother and me kissing her, but I kissed you by mistake?"

"We were not much more than children then."

"Colinette, tell me one thing truly: do you love Willie Klatz?"

"Sincerely."

"Well enough to marry him?"

"What is the idea of this questionnaire? You ought to know me well enough by this time to feel certain that, with me, no one ever got at the truth by coercion. Aunt Rinty Pickens set out

after the truth about my mother's relatives when I first came to Grandmother Gard's to live—"

"I know," said Neal, "she has a weird idea of your mother's family to this day."

"I wish you would drive faster."

"Why?"

"When I start for a place I like to get there in a hurry. Of course I haven't the least idea where the internment camp is in this case—"

"I am taking you home to your grandmother's," Neal informed her, with a touch of severity in his tone.

"Oh, I shall be glad to see grandmother again. What time do you expect to reach Redmoon?"

"Depends on the clip I make."

"Well, I would like to suggest that as I am headed for home I must reach there before it is light enough for the neighbors to recognize me. If Aunt Rinthy sees me in this rig she will be startled and angry. You see, she visited the gipsies for the purpose of having her fortune told. I charged her the regulation fee and she may feel cheated if she finds out that the girl who taxed her a dollar was only John Gard's girl in a black wig."

"Do you mean to tell me, Colinette, that you and Willie Klatz and the Dunlaps were out at that gipsy camp all the time, while Jeff Plummer,

and your relatives and I circled around and around and around searching wildly for you?"

"I am not telling you anything, and I'm not going to until we get to grandmother's. I shall have some explanations to make to her, and I might as well explain to you both at the same time and save words. Of late I've been selling my conversations and explanations at quite a high figure. Besides I never was one to waste words."

"Then let me explain how I came to—"

"Wait; we will both explain to grandmother."

"All right. Then it's full speed ahead until we nose into port at grandmother's dock," assented Neal, and the car shot forward.

The farmhouses reeled by once more. Now and then Neal lessened speed to keep from murdering a too faithful watch dog, or to avoid a puncture at a bridge approach. They passed a milk truck hurrying for a station, morning was coming. Neal consulted his watch and accelerated speed a bit. The landscape took on a familiar aspect—Lake Jane flashed by, then the quiet outskirts of Redmoon, Jefferson Street, where the Plummers lived, a whirl around the old Pettingill House corner, and at last Grandmother Gard's little brown house, as sound asleep as a kitten, facing the widowed Dunlap residence, which seemed to glare accusingly at the

despoiler of its comfort as she descended from Captain Brackley's car.

As yet no one was stirring the entire length of Brown Street. But this immunity would not long continue, as the travelers knew very well.

They knocked cautiously at Grandmother Gard's door. When at last the key grated and the door opened slightly, an oblong section of Grandmother Gard herself appeared through the merest crack. This crack was so narrow that only one eye was available in aiding Mrs. Gard's decision as to the identity of her early callers. This one eye, unfortunately, took in the girl, swarthy, red-capped, ear-ringed; it did not rise to the girl's escort. Consequently Mrs. Gard's welcome was far from warm.

"What do you want?" she demanded, and the exhibition of grandmotherly nightgown grew even narrower with the further closing of the door. The escort turned his back and gazed over toward the Dunlap house and his shoulders shook.

"To tell your fortune, madam," explained the brazen gipsy. "If you cross me 'and with silver I will tell you w'at is to come and w'at 'as already gone by—"

"At this time in the mornin'?"

"It's never too early to find out the truth, madam."

"Well, I know already what's gone by; and a

woman of my age can pretty near tell what is comin’,” said grandmother not unkindly. “A few quiet years, a nice respectable funeral in the church, and a ‘Sacred to the Memory of’ up in the cemetery.”

“I told the fortune of a relative of yours not long since,” persisted the gipsy.

“For the land o’ Goshen’s sake! Was you the one?” The crack in the door widened a bit. “Well, if you don’t come no nearer other folkses’ fortunes than you did Rinty Pickenses’, you ain’t worth one cent, let alone one dollar. That’s what you fooled her out of. And her house wa’n’t burned down at all, an’ her daughter’s leg wa’n’t—”

“You ’ave lost something and I can tell you where to find it.”

Grandmother’s interest was aroused. “What have I lost?”

“A granddaughter, and I can tell you where she is.”

“Where is she?” demanded Mrs. Gard, opening the door wide enough to disclose the entire front of her white robe, and her nightcap tied with sweet innocence under her chin.

“Right in your arms!” cried the gipsy, and clasped the bewildered lady, bestowing as she did so a smoke-colored kiss on the double chin just

above the tied bow of the nightcap strings.

"Now, grandmother, you toddle into the bedroom and dress so that Neal Brackley can come in. Don't you see that he is waiting?"

Mrs. Gard acted upon this advice so suddenly that the tail of a snowy robe fairly snapped as she rounded the corner into her own bedroom.

"Now," begged Colinette, "please take the car away and park it somewhere else, or the moment Uncle Luther gets out of bed and comes to the front porch to consult his thermometer he'll be over to demand the why and the wherefore."

"Colinette, tell me first if I may—" began Neal, but Colinette was imperative:

"Go now, right away, or you know what will happen. Uncle Luther will occupy the time telling how his health and Elmer's has been ruined by the fiendish neglect of Aunt Susan, and you won't have a chance to explain why you kidnapped a gipsy, nor I how I came to be one, or why I love Willie Klatz better than anyone else on earth—almost."

She paused a moment to watch the car whisk around the corner out of sight, and then made a careful estimate as to how long it would take Neal to dispose of it down town in the public garage and walk back. There would be sufficient time for her purpose but none to waste.

She sat down, took off her red handkerchief, wig, unhooked her tinsel ear-whoops and piled them in a little heap by her side on the floor. She could hear her grandmother's hurried movements as she dressed in her bedroom, and she waited patiently drooping in the best rocking-chair.

It may have been the dark coloring upon her face, the artificially deepened shadows about her eyes, which gave her the bitter, almost tragic look. Her grandmother noticed it at once as she came bustling in, still hooking the last fastenings at her waist.

"What is the matter? Ain't you glad to be home with gram'ma once more? You look as if you'd had a spell of sickness. I guess it's that old brown stuff you've got all over your face. Go now, and wash up and change your dress and look like a human bein' before he gits back. I'll build a fire, and fry some nice thin slices of salt pork, and warm up some potatoes. You might run out an' bring in a handful of ripe tomatoes; they're gittin' just splendid now. And Neal likes 'em, you remember—"

"I will, grandmother, but before he comes back I have something very important to say to you—"

"Of course; you want to tell me all about the Susans, but you can do that after breakfast."

"There is something I must say before he gets

back—something I want to explain—a promise which I made to you long ago which I feel that I—must no longer keep—”

“There never was but one promise I wouldn’t consent to your breakin’—just one. You know what that one promise is, so let’s not talk any more about that.”

“It is that one promise, grandmother, which I must break—”

“Colinette!” There was anguished upbraiding in the voice, there was horror, and the hurt of a loving heart visible in Grandmother Gard’s countenance. “I thought that was settled for all time between us two!”

“But when I made the promise I didn’t remember that I might be doing a wrong to—somebody else by keeping the secret.”

Mrs. Gard made an impatient gesture. “You’re a funny girl; you’re one of them kind that strain at a gnat and gulp down a camel—a hull circus! You’re so mighty afraid of doin’ your friends dirt, and agin, you wade in and do things that—that—why, Waldo Pickens himself wouldn’t think of doing; no, nor your Uncle Luther, nuther!”

Colinette sat bowed before the storm of her grandmother’s displeasure. She waited until it had subsided somewhat, then began again exactly where she had left off:

"It's like this; it didn't make any difference to you nor to me, and between us two we agreed that our secret should never make any difference to the Susans and it hasn't, I am sure it hasn't—"

"Of course it ain't! Then what do you want to go rakin' it up for at this late day? Who could it make any difference to?"

"To the man I marry."

"Why, what do you mean? Have you and Willie Klatz—why, my goodness! Why, I'm tickled to death! And I was afraid all the time that it was— But what difference will it make to Willie Klatz whether you are my—on my! there I go, and we promised never to speak of it, never to breath it, never to say the words! What's the use of rakin' it up, I say?"

"If you won't release me from my promise I shall never marry anybody—not anybody in this world!"

"I never will give my consent!" Mrs. Gard covered her face with her apron and began to weep, loudly, noisily, sobbing and rocking back and forth in an emotion composed of anger and grief. It was a typical Gard demonstration. This was the way of Mrs. Dunlap and of her daughter Susan.

But not of Colinette. Sitting calmly there in front of the swaying, sobbing old woman, Coli-

nette almost envied her grandmother that power to vent all her emotions, her sorrow and disappointment, in one devastating storm.

A step sounded on the walk, the step of one eager to arrive, to explain, to receive explanations. Both women started, but it was too late to change the aspect of affairs: a tattoo on the door and Neal was in the room. And there sat Colinette, still in her gipsy costume from which she had torn all the picturesque details and stacked them in a gaudy heap on the floor, and there sat Grandmother Gard with her apron over her head, concealing her grief from the eye but not from the ear.

Neal drew his own dismayed conclusions. Someone was angry—was hurt, at him, of course. He slid into a chair holding his hat upon his knees. It was not what he had expected as he had come so joyously up Brown Street, past Colinette's studio—his once on a time—and the Pettingill House, recalling with a grin the good old days of "The Bat Club," and the fun the "gang" had managed to get out of the meetings in that old hotel. And now this! Colinette must have given her grandmother an intimation of what had passed between them on the road home and— But what had Mrs. Gard told him on the occasion of his former visit? That she would be even more

pleased with him as a grandson-in-law than with Willie Klatz?

Colinette favored him with a wry smile. "Grandmother is—so glad to see me home again," she explained.

Grandmother came from behind her entrenchments to explain on her own behalf.

"I'm glad enough to have her home," she declared between sobs, "but she—always manages to do something I don't want her to do!"

"She's bad through and through," acquiesced Neal with a grin. "But I'm here to explain how I came to—"

"Please, Neal, I think I'd better begin," begged Colinette. "But first, I want to promise grandmother that I shall do what she wishes me to do—absolutely!"

"No you won't; you just say that, but you won't," persisted grandmother stubbornly. "Anyhow, you go wash your face and change your clothes while I git breakfast, then we'll talk afterwards."

But Colinette insisted that the talk come before breakfast.

"We can sit and eat breakfast with Uncle Luther and Uncle Waldo and Aunt Rinthy sitting about, but I am not willing to make my confession before such an audience, especially Aunt Rinthy, because—"

“Well, go ahead then,” agreed Mrs. Gard, “I can stand it if you can, but you are certainly an awful lookin’ critter with that brown and red paint all over your face.”

XX

WILLIE KLATZ picked up his supplies and Colinet's little velvet pouch, wiping the dust of the road from the latter, and began the last lap of his journey to the camp. At times he shook his head and laughed, and twice he muttered, "big fool—Neal—jealous; that's what's the matter with him. If only he had waited—"

Willie's reflections were cut short by the appearance in his path of Jack Lovell, the gipsy. He was in a belligerent mood. He had come for his van and must have it at once.

"Is your wife still sick?" inquired Willie politely.

"She's dead, but I have another wife," the gipsy informed him.

"Say now, that's what I call some speed," declared Willie admiringly. He lowered his bag of provisions into the dust once more the better to gaze upon a man who could court and marry with such expedition. "Now—er—it takes a white m—er—I should say, a Yankee—longer than that to do his courting. I know of one young chap who has been fifteen years making up to a girl and he isn't anywhere sure of her yet."

The gipsy was not interested. "Yes," he said, "but I have come for the van and I must have it."

"All right. Let's see-e—we were to do the gipsying for you—the fortune-telling—if I remember correctly, and you promised to accept our earnings during your absence as rent for your outfit, and you were to have the use of our automobile to take your crowd off to your relatives somewhere, afterward to bring our car back and leave it at Hank Jensen's. That was the bargain, wasn't it?"

The gipsy eyed Willie cautiously. Willie became aware that Lovell was about to "gipsy" him, and he braced himself to obey Colinette's orders and not to be gipsied.

"Your woman couldn't tell fortunes," hedged Jack. "I dare say you 'aven't 'ad a dozen folk out at the camp since I went away."

Willie did a little hedging himself. "Oh I guess we've had as many as a dozen. And of course my women folks have done the best they could. But we've had a nice lonely spell of camping anyhow."

"I think you must pay by the week," announced Jack.

"Awh, say now, that wasn't the bargain—"

"I think you ought to, and I think I can make you—"

"Tell you what I'll do: in the morning you

go round to Bennet's garage and get my car and drive it up here and then we'll settle."

"I want fifty dollars," said the gipsy.

Willie made a swift mental calculation. "Fifty dollars! Gee! You don't want anything, do you. Well, you go and get my car and bring it here in the morning and we will see what we can do."

It was a warm night and the camp fire had been allowed to die out. The place looked deserted. Willie carried his provisions around to the kitchen, where he found Mrs. Dunlap dozing in her chair and attending a feeble fire in the cook-stove.

"We thought you'd be late," she explained, "so we kept a fire to make up a cup of tea if you should happen to want one. We had to stay up, for the gipsy has come. Colinette slipped down to the road to warn you that he was here and to tell you that he was sort of ugly like about his rent for the van."

"Where's Sue?"

"She was round here a minute ago. Hoo-hoo, Susan, Willie has come!" Susan appeared from the gloom of the trees, and Willie realized at once that it was Susan in her least agreeable mood.

"Where is Colinette?" asked Mrs. Dunlap.

"Don't know," responded Willie truthfully. If Neal had kept up the speed with which he had left the gap in the fence, Colinette would be be-

yond Cambria by that time. But who could tell?

"You saw her, didn't you?" demanded Mrs. Dunlap anxiously. "Because that gipsy is hanging round and I wouldn't put it past him to rob her if he could find out that she carried money in that velvet bag."

"He's gone all right," soothed Willie. "I watched him head for town. He's coming for the van in the morning, though, so I suppose this is our last night of gipsying. I am sorry, too. We've had a good time. Don't you think we've had a good time?" He looked appealingly at the stormy lady.

"I've had better," she answered sullenly.

"I never did," said Willie stoutly, "never; but I suppose it's over."

"Yes, and it is time too. I am beginning to feel anxious to get home," said Mrs. Dunlap. "I do hope Luther and Elmer won't be too much put out because I've stayed away so long. It wasn't just right. But, really, it ain't been altogether my fault, has it? Colinette told me today that she would explain to her uncle Luther that it had been her fault and not mine that we have stayed so long."

"Yes, better let her do the explaining," assented Willie absently, with his mind on a person much nearer than Colinette.

"Oh yes, Colinette can soothe pa; Colinette can

do anything. At least Willie thinks that she can." Susan tried to keep all bitterness out of her voice, but she failed miserably.

"I don't see what's become of Colinette," said Mrs. Dunlap. "I'm worried about that bag of money—" She paused as her eyes rested on the identical bag in Willie's hand. "She came up across the pasture with you, then, did she, Willie?"

"No, she didn't," owned Willie, "and I'm worried about her myself. Take this bag, Mrs. Dunlap, and go to bed. You needn't be afraid of the gipsy, he's gone for the night. And you, Sue, don't you want to walk down as far as the gap with me to see what has become of Colinette?"

"No, thank you; you would enjoy going alone better I am sure."

"I'm sure I wouldn't, Sue. Come now, be a good girl—for once."

"I'm not going!"

"All right then, neither am I." Willie sat down with an air of permanency—the settled appearance of a church.

"What's come over you all!" scolded Mrs. Dunlap. "Susan, you go right straight off across the pasture to the gap and see what has become of your cousin. Hoo-hoo her good, and if she doesn't answer, come back for Willie and me and

we'll both go. You can't blame Willie for not wanting to travel away back to the gap unless it's necessary. He is tired."

"Now don't you worry, ma; Willie isn't so tired, for Willie didn't tramp up from town; Willie came up in the car. I heard the car myself. And Willie will go back to where Colinette sits waiting for him in the car. And he wants to go alone, but out of politeness he asks me, hoping all the time I will refuse so that Colinette and he can take their little sprint alone in the car. You can't fool me, Willie Klatz! I haven't any lover, but—I have had in the past, and I know how such things work out. You and Colinette needn't both be tender of me," she said to Willie. "You both think I would feel left out and forlorn if you two were to go for a moonlight ride. Don't you ever believe that I should. I'm going to bed right now. You two can take your ride and stay till morning if you want to (it's most that now). You can't hurt my feelings!"

The young woman started around the grove in the direction of the van. Willie laid a restraining hand upon her mother's arm.

"Just a moment, Mrs. Dunlap: you won't care, will you, if I lug Susan off against her will to—well, to look after Colinette?"

"Mercy, no, Willie; lug her off. I don't know what's got into Susan. She's been as contrary

and as snappy as she could be all this afternoon. It ain't like her. But I s'pose seeing you and Colinette so happy and contented brings back her own trouble and breakup with Jeff Plummer. You know how you would feel yourself under such—"

"Yes—yes, well, you go to bed and to sleep, Mrs. Dunlap, and I will bring Susan back all safe and sound—"

"Both of 'em—Colinette too."

"Well—er—but Colinette is all right; don't you fret about her, Mrs. Dunlap. Now you go to bed—"

He was gone in pursuit of Susan who, he feared, would carry out her intention of disappearing for the night before he could overtake her.

In place of seeking her bed in the van, Susan was wandering off by the side of the river in the direction of the spot where she and Willie had loitered the other time. He saw her dark figure in the moonlight, and in a moment he was at her side.

"Where are you going, Susan?"

"What's that to you?"

"It's a good deal to me—everything to me."

"Willie Klatz, I want you to stop talking like this! In France you seemed to have learned the trick of making—well—of being sort of soft on two girls at once."

"Have you ever seen me being soft on two girls at once?"

"You are trying to be soft on me tonight or you wouldn't come pounding after me up along the river instead of going across the pasture to your own girl who is waiting for you down in the car."

"Didn't we promise each other that we would come up along the river here for another walk before we quit gipsying for good, and isn't this our last chance?"

Susan's pent-up indignation burst forth: "and instead, didn't you wander off with Colinette for a moonlight stroll and forget all about it?"

"You're off, Sue, a thousand miles off. I wasn't wandering with Colinette; I was wandering with about fifty pounds of spuds, oatmeal, codfish, and dried beef on my back, and wandering mighty fast at that, for such a pack as I carried."

"Colinette went to meet you right after the gipsy came—"

"I know, I saw her for just one minute down at the gap. She threw me her bag of money and says she, 'Jack Lovell is back and wants his wagon. Here is his rent; don't let him gipsy you in your settlement.' S'help me, that's the last I've seen of her."

"But didn't you drive home in the car?"

"No, I tried to steal the car, but I slipped up on

that, and had to swing the bag of stuff home by main strength. And I haven't been walking out with Colinette nor with anybody else. I took a run with somebody down in Lovejoy, but that's neither here nor there. I got away from him, and afterwards he got away from me, but I don't know as that bears on the present case, either. Anyhow, I can tell you about that later. I want to talk about something of more importance to-night. This is about the place where I—where you—where we stood last night. I think it is the most beautiful spot on earth; don't you?"

"I don't know that it is; I think it is kind of low and boggy."

"It is boggy, I'll admit, and of course there are snakes here—" Susan gave a little squeak and a skip and caught Willie's arm. "But it isn't water, or grass, or trees which make a place beautiful, it is what passes through the human mind, what thrills the human heart at that particular place. If I were rich I'd buy this pasture of old Bennet and put a fence around this spot, for right here, on this spot, I first kissed the only girl I ever loved, and right here, on this spot, I will take the second kiss." Willie suited the action to the word, and took his second kiss from a wholly yielding girl who, however, had the grace to murmur between the two following kisses, "But Colinette, Willie; poor little Colinette!"

"Let's not think of Colinette at present," said Willie, "let's think of ourselves. I love you, and I want you for my wife. Will you marry me, Susan?"

"But—what will Col—"

"Tell me fairly and squarely and no fooling, Susan Taylor, will you marry me?"

"I—I'm afraid I love you, Willie—"

"Bless your dear heart!"

"But I've no business to love you, Willie, because—"

"But Colinette cut in under you with your other sweetheart—"

"If it hadn't been for that," cried Susan with flashing eyes, "I'd never have done this, I'd never have let you make love to me, never! I'm no sneak!"

"You bet you ain't, Susan."

"The worst of it is, I'm not sure whether Colinette did cut me out with Jeff Plummer or not. If she did, then why did she turn right around, run away from Jeff Plummer and make up to you?"

Under the moonlight Willie's smile was inscrutable.

"She's such a changeable little devil—that Colinette," was what he said. "But other folks beside Colinette have a right to change their minds."

"This is awful wicked of us, Willie. I'm afraid it will break poor Colinette's heart."

"Oh not so bad," said Willie, in his sudden happiness reverting to the style of speech of Waldo Pickens' hired man. "This is the way of all lovers all the world over. Now when shall we be married, Susan?"

"Gracious, Willie, you have just begun your courting, and to a girl, courting time is the best of all."

"You had your courting time with Jeff Plummer, and were you so very happy?"

"I was miserably unhappy."

"Well then, Sue dear, have your marrying time with Willie Klatz and the courting time shall last all through our lives. Shall I get the license in Lovejoy tomorrow, and shall we go home as man and wife?"

"If you think best, Willie. Now shall we go and find Colinette?"

"Bless your heart, do you imagine Colinette sitting down by that gap in the fence waiting all night for me to come and fetch her? Not a bit of it. Colinette has gone about her own affairs long ago. Now let's get back to the camp, wake up your mother and make our promises over again before her and tell her all about it."

Mrs. Dunlap, roused from a sound and healthful sleep which left her a bit groggy, was pretty

hard to convince of the fact that her Susan, and not Colinette Gard, was engaged to marry Willie Klatz. She insisted upon getting up and into her dressing-gown and going down to Colinette's camp to see that she was home safe and sound. When they discovered the deserted condition of said camp it was uphill work for Willie to stem the hue and cry with an unbelievable story of Neal Brackley's descending like a wolf on the fold and abducting Colinette. But in time he managed to convince them.

"Why didn't you tell me when we were on our walk?" demanded Susan, none too pleased with Willie's reticence in regard to the piratical action of Captain Brackley.

"I wanted first to settle this other matter between you and me," owned Willie sheepishly.

"You waited until Colinette ran away and left you before you came back to me," accused Susan. Willie was feign to make a joke of it and chuckled "that was about the size of it," and "they could both see how broken-hearted he was, couldn't they?"

Afterwards he insisted upon celebrating their engagement, and the last night of their gipsying by building a huge bonfire, around which they sat and made plans for the future.

"We are going to have a nice comfy home with a room in it always for you, Mrs. Dunlap. And

when things get thick around your place, you are coming to us till the storm clears away. I know how things have been over at your house, and I've always just longed to be in a position where I'd have authority to say a few words. Now I shall be, and it's a good thing that Dunlap has had this chance to practice home cooking, for he and Elmer will probably have a lot of it to do before they strike their proper gait."

Susan drew near to Willie and slid her hand into his, remembering one certain night when her former lover had advised her that in marrying her he wanted her to understand that he "wasn't marrying the whole Dunlap family."

XXI

"I HARDLY know where to begin," hesitated Colinette.

"Begin with Susan," prompted her grandmother. "How is young Susan?"

"You would be surprised to see how well she is," declared Colinette, brightening in announcing the good news. "There is nothing like free air and—love to bring a girl back to health."

"Seems to have done you good although it ain't improved your complexion any," sniffed grandmother scornfully. Knowing what she did, she did not approve of Colinette's shameful flaunting of her love affair here in the face of Neal Brackley.

"Oh I've had air, but not much—love. Love doesn't seem to be my *métier*."

"What is that—*métier*?" inquired grandmother, still in a querulous mood.

"I don't know—exactly," owned Colinette, "but it is a nice word, I think, and it is used quite often now in the better magazines."

"If you just as lief," said Grandmother Gard, "I wish you'd use plain, everyday English. It's

goin' to be hard enough for you to clear things up anyhow."

"It makes me mighty happy—your saying that, Colinette," declared Neal, and Mrs. Gard looked at him in bewilderment. "Then it was Susan—"

Colinette interrupted him again. "I'll tell you everything from the beginning."

"No, no, not from the beginning," begged her grandmother, and now it was Neal's turn to look surprised. For a moment Mrs. Gard showed signs of retiring into grief and her apron again, and Neal could see no reason for her distress.

"Well then, I'll begin with my coming home to Redmoon." Her grandmother heaved a sigh of relief and settled back to listen.

"Word reached me—it makes no difference how—that my Cousin Susan was seeing a good deal of Jeff Plummer, and that there was no doubt but that she was going to marry him. I was never so unhappy in my life. Susan! My dear Susan, whom I loved—why, next to you, grandmother—"

"I don't believe you love me very much, or you wouldn't contrary me so all the time," complained Mrs. Gard.

With a look which registered itself forever in Neal Brackley's mind, Colinette leaned over and touched the back of the old woman's hand.

"I made up my mind," went on Colinette, "to come home and see what I could do to—"

"Then you did do it a purpose!" exclaimed Mrs. Gard. "You did come home and upset Susan's affair and almost kill her! Why, Colinette, what makes you act so?"

Colinette looked so unhappy that Neal felt sorry for her. He tried to lighten the situation with a joke.

"She's bad through and through, grandmother. You can't manage her alone; you need help—"

"I should a thought you'd felt pretty bad when you saw what you had done; when you saw Susan tumble right into bed sick, and pretty near go to her grave—"

"I did feel terribly, grandmother, oh, terribly. But I kept saying over and over, 'men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love.'"

"Eh?" said grandmother.

"Would you mind going into particulars in regard to your method?" requested Neal with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

"I had no method," Colinette hastened to assure him, "I just came—I was different—"

"Yes, we all agree as to that."

"Agree to what?"

"That you are different."

"I mean that mine was a fresh face. Men like Jeff Plummer are always attracted by something

dif—well, something that they have no business to be attracted by. When Jeff is married he will leave his wife to rock the baby while he walks out with the new milliner or the maid of all work.”

“Then you walked out with him?” demanded Neal.

“She never did,” broke in Mrs. Gard, coming to the rescue gallantly when she saw signs of her beloved getting into difficulties.

“You tell me then, grandmother,” pleaded Neal, “what did she do?”

“As near as I can figger out the worst thing she did was to dance with him (Susan don’t dance) at that there firemen’s ball; she danced with him and looked pretty, I s’pose, and let him talk to her about things he knows, base-ball and—well, that’s about all I guess, ain’t it, Colinette? I guess that’s all Jeff knows, ain’t it?”

“And hunting on Dahinda Marsh,” prompted Colinette, “that was all.”

“Do you mean to say that he broke his engagement with Susan Dunlap for no better reason than that Colinette let him talk to her and dance with her? Why, that was only common politeness.”

“That was all.” Colinette seemed eager to defend herself. “I was just commonly polite.”

“And uncommonly pretty,” supplemented Neal.

“Which she ain’t now,” said grandmother. “I

can't bear to see that brown stuff on your face. I do wish you'd go and wash up."

"When I have finished my explanation," persisted Colinette. "When they had had their quarrel, Susan and Jeff, and mind you, they would have had it just the same if I had been in Africa, only it would have happened after their marriage—Susan fell sick and I was dreadfully frightened and oh, dreadfully unhappy! To see Susan's eyes full of hatred for me when I loved her so! And to feel so uncertain as to whether my plan would work out right—oh, if I were to talk until noon I couldn't tell you the half of what I suffered at that time—" A pitiful tremor shook Colinette's utterance.

"Then, at the psychological moment, enter the hero, Willie Klatz in a blaze of glory. I never was so glad to see a person before in my life. Willie and I had a talk and we made up a plan. I wasn't sure it would work, and Willie was depressingly skeptical—Willie knows so little about girls. But he loves Susan, always has and always will. The problem was to get Susan to love Willie, even more than she had ever loved Jeff Plummer.

"You understand, Neal, that I couldn't talk to grandmother about this trouble, because her motto differs so from mine, and this was a case where undiluted honesty wasn't—the most effi-

cient remedy— Wait a moment, please, grandmother, I know what you were about to say. But Susan was due to be fooled by somebody, and I thought it might better be me than Jeff Plummer.

“Willie left everything to me. He let me captain the affair. I explained to him as well as I could my theory of love. I said, ‘All girls love a hero. Jeff is a great hero—on the diamond. And girls love a man whom other girls love. It was the triumph of Susan’s life when she won Jeff Plummer away from Lila Merton.’ I said, ‘Willie, if you want Susan you must make love to Colinette.’ ”

“Heavy work—heavy work for Willie,” sighed Neal.

Colinette ignored the interruption and went on with her confession:

“There was one complication which I had not confessed even to Willie—a letter from Captain Neal Brackley announcing that he would be here on such and such a date—well—I don’t know as I can go on.”

Colinette fell silent and sat twisting her hands in her lap, but as neither Neal or her grandmother seemed inclined to help her out, she took up her story again:

“I suggested to Willie that we go on a camping trip and get lost—good and lost—and Willie

approved. We didn't dream how much skill it would require for us to keep lost. I thought perhaps Jeff Plummer might wheel about looking for us, but I never dreamed that all our relatives would take the trail as they did. I had tried to rope grandmother into the scheme—"

"And didn't you?" broke in Mrs. Gard, "Didn't you rope me in to help you in your waywardness? Didn't I start out with you knowin' well enough that the boiled potatoes I left in my pantry would be good and fresh when I got back to warm 'em up?"

"You did that for Aunt Susan's sake, grandmother."

"Course I did, but it wasn't honest, just the same. It was an underhanded piece of business. And worse—she addressed her complaint to Neal—worse, she made me promise solemnly to have the rheumatism so bad that I couldn't do a bit of cookin' for Susan's men folks. I promised, and, I tell you, what I've suffered from that fit of rheumatism that I didn't have at all, no man knows but me! Couldn't wait on myself free an' above board, as I've always been in the habit of doin'; had to sneak out an' steal my own kindlin' wood, my own potatoes, my own onions. Why, I've got to be such a *consummate* thief through that rheumatic attack that the neighbors' hens

ain't safe from me if I should be put to it. That's the way sin works on a body. Why, I've come within one of tellin' an' out an' out lie about my health two or three times. Folks would say, 'what's the matter with you, Mrs. Gard?' and I've come near blurtin' a lie right out and sayin', 'I'm pretty bad off with the rheumatism.' But I've always ketched myself in time. I've never slipped clean over into the pit in that line."

"What did you tell them?" beamed Colinette, attempting to put an arm around her grandmother's neck in her enthusiasm.

Grandmother released herself from the proffered embrace. "Don't put them dirty little paws on me. When you git washed up I'll be glad to have you hug me, but not as you are now. Why, I told 'em that Waldo Pickens and his wife thought it was the rheumatism, and that was the truth. They named it themselves and rubbed it in every time they saw me humpin' round with that old cane."

Neal's laughter was hearty but injudicious. Colinette, whose position gave her a view of the Dunlap porch, realized this when too late, at least too late for Neal. Uncle Luther was consulting his thermometer. His hair was rumpled from recent contact with his pillow, his braces, not yet adjusted, swung loose behind, but his ear was attuned to unwonted noises in the neighborhood,

and his eye rested suspiciously on the open window under his mother-in-law's porch from which emanated that sound of untimely mirth.

Colinette swooped to gather up her discarded finery, and there was no sign of her in the house a few moments later when Dunlap entered.

"Well hello, Brackley," he cried in astonishment, "how did you get into town at this time of day?" He shook hands with Neal. "Well, how are you feelin' this morning, Mother Gard? Any trace yet? She been tellin' you about the trick our folks have played on us—gone off an' stayed off all summer?" Dunlap's indignation prevented him from waiting for answers to any of his questions, which was a relief to those being questioned. "I stepped out to look at the thermometer and I saw Mother Gard's winder open and I heard a man laugh inside the house. I thought it must be Doc. Merton. I thought Mother Gard had got worse in the night and sent for him by telephone. Yeh see, since John's girl has rigged her out with a telephone and a bathroom and an ice-box, she's as independent as a hawg on a lake. I wish John's girl would confine herself to takin' care of her grandmother, an' not slop over on to takin' care of them that don't need her. This carryin' off my wife an' Susan Taylor an' keepin' 'em off all summer is the most ridiculous trick she's ever played yet, and that's

puttin' it strong. If they'd let us know where they was so's we could drop 'em a line in case Mother Gard should die or git worse or somethin', but not a word! An' we don't know whether they're travelin' or campin' or what they are doin' or where they are.

"They hadn't been gone three days when I needed 'em and sent Elmer and Jeff Plummer out to bring 'em home. But they couldn't find 'em. No sir! They found the car that they started out with laid up in a garage at Lovejoy. They must have took a train from Lovejoy an' gone goodness knows where.

"Then Waldo Pickens and his wife started out, me with 'em, and we circled around till a darned lyin' gipsy put a lot of nonsense into Rinthy's head about her house bein' burned up and Helen's leg broke, and so nothin' to do but to make for home fast and furious. And when we got home, Waldo wouldn't start out again, so there you are! Every day expectin' 'em to heave in sight, and every day they don't heave. I jocks, I ain't goin' to stand it much longer!"

"How can you—ah—avoid standing it?" asked Neal.

"They can't stay away forever, and when they git home I'll bet I'll learn 'em!"

"I don't think you can do much to hurt Coli-nette," boasted Mrs. Gard with a curl of the lip.

“Maybe not. But I bet I’ll learn them Susans where they git off! Huh! Doin’ a trick like this—all summer— Huh! And havin’ to eat Elmer’s biscuits—I tell you, I ain’t been used to this kind of work! When I marry a wife and support her I expect her to airn that support! Elmer’s gittin’ as thin as a rail, goin’ without proper victuals! An’ a nice lookin’ place our house is—dust an’ dirt everywhere—dirty dishes and dirty clothes! I’m just about fed up on this sort of thing!”

Dunlap rose to go. “If Mother Gard had been in any kind of health she might have helped out some—made a batch of friedcakes now an’ then, or—somethin’; but she’s been laid up all summer. But what do you s’pose John Gard’s girl cares about that? Huh! Her gran’mother might be dead an’ buried for all she’d care—”

“Now don’t lug me into that grouch of yours, Luthèr,” warned Mrs. Gard. “You ain’t heard me complain, have yeh? You ain’t got near enough to me the hull livin’ summer to hear whether I was complainin’ or not. I’d have been glad of an axe in my kindlin’ wood once in a while, or a back to bend over my potatoes, or an arm to unhitch a ham from the storeroom, but I didn’t git ’em. I’ve done all these things for myself, and I ain’t complained—not once. In fact, I’ve been glad that your Susan and young Susan

could git out and have a good time for once in their lives. Now let's not air our family troubles any more before folks that ain't interested in 'em. Neal, here, don't care about 'em."

"How did you say you got here?" Luther demanded again of Neal, and this time awaited the answer.

"I came by motor car."

"Motor car—say, why don't you take a whirl out round and see if you couldn't run down Willie Klatz? I'd go with you, or Elmer—"

Neal wagged a dissenting hand. "I'm a rotten detective. In times gone by I've tried running down Willie Klatz. It can't be done. And I wouldn't worry about them, Mr. Dunlap; they'll come home all right one of these days—"

"Worry about them? Huh! Not much! I'm worryin' about myself and Elmer. No, as I say, I can't punish John Gard's girl nor Willie Klatz for this outrage, but them Susans—"

"Better forgive the Susans too," laughed Neal, and rose to shake hands with Mrs. Gard. "Have you been to breakfast, Mr. Dunlap? No? Then come down to the hotel and take breakfast with me—"

Mrs. Gard made a spasmodic motion to object, but subsided at Neal's earnest signal, given over Dunlap's head.

"I did intend to breakfast here with Mrs. Gard,

but find her not up to entertaining just now, so come down and be my guest. I'll be up again for a short call before I leave town," he explained to Mrs. Gard.

While Dunlap was at his own house making a few additions to his toilet now that he was to breakfast at the hotel, Colinette came forth from her hiding to warn Neal not to mention her return during his breakfast with Uncle Luther.

"I'll manage to return some time during the day," she said, "and after that be at home to my friends."

"But not, I hope, until after we have finished our explanations," objected Neal. "Remember, I haven't had a showdown at the explaining business yet." And then he ran away laughing, to take his complacent guest in tow.

XXII

ROUSED by his father's news of Neal Brackley's presence at Mrs. Gard's house, Elmer prepared a sketchy breakfast for himself and got across the road in time to interrupt that lady and her granddaughter at their more attractive meal. His surprise at finding Colinette at home was unbounded. He accepted Mrs. Gard's invitation to "set up" and partook of gems, fried potatoes and coffee with an appetite which made his assertion that he had been to breakfast seem a feeble prevarication. During this morning gorge he put Colinette through a severe catechism.

"Where was you?"

"I?"

"The whole bunch—ma, and Susan and all?"

"Why, Elmer, where did we start for?"

"You started to auto around and to camp, but you didn't auto, for Jeff and I found your car at Lovejoy, and we tied it up there, and you didn't go back after it, because we went back twice to find out. Now where was you?"

"Do you mean to say you took that old car away from Lovejoy?"

"No, we tied it up so you couldn't take it away. We thought we'd find you that way."

"Joke on you, Elmer; that old car was no good, as Willie soon found out. We had to abandon it. But we did enjoy our ride so much; and our camping too. Did you and Jeff happen to pass a spring out at—now let me see where was that spring? It is so hard for me to remember directions—we might have been in the moon for all I could describe it."

"You must have been in the moon, for we drove from—"

Here Colinette passed him his seventh gem, and encouraged him to describe in detail the good roads which he and Jeff had encountered, the poor ones, the carburator trouble which had delayed them at Greenfield, the disagreement with a farmer when they had run down a calf.

It was a pleasant hour for Elmer who had, indeed, been rather glad than otherwise at the length of the search Jeff had been moved to make. Jeff had paid all the bills. Later, when Jeff had gone out alone to finish his search, Elmer had sincerely desired his immediate success.

"How the dickens is it that you are home and the rest not?" Elmer demanded, suddenly emerging from the hypnotic state of description into which Colinette's interest in his adventures had thrown him.

"I can't tell when the others are due to arrive, but I think very soon."

"Well how did you—"

"Have another gem, Elmer. I made 'em myself—under grandmother's supervision. Good, aren't they? Did you ever know of anybody who can make gems as grandmother makes 'em?"

He took the gem. "But how—"

"Elmer, you might just as well save your breath," broke in Mrs. Gard. "You know as well as I do that when Colinette makes up her mind not to tell a thing, wild horses couldn't drag it out of her."

"Hasn't she told you where they went and what made 'em stay so long?"

"Not yet, but if she ever does, I'll let you know. I don't care particularly where they've been, now that she's back agin all safe and the rest of 'em are on the way."

"But how—"

"Some more coffee, Elmer, and do take this last gem to save it; otherwise it will go to the chickens. Now if you want to know where we went and what we did, you will have to ask Willie Klatz when he gets in. You see, managing the car as Willie did, he will be better able to describe our wanderings than I have been. I don't suppose—really—that you can get much of an idea of our trip from what I have told you."

"I should say I couldn't," Elmer agreed heartily.

When Elmer left, in place of going to work as he should have done, he went up to tell his Aunt Rinthy of Colinette's return. He also met Gusta Klatz and Helen Pickens and broke the news to them. They all came at once to greet the adventurer.

Mrs. Gard sat back in a glow of admiration at Colinette's skill in conducting her interview with Aunt Rinthy.

"And no lyin' nuther," she congratulated herself, "not a lie so far as I can see. And it ain't none of Aunt Rinthy's business where they was. And if Colinette can keep from tellin', and that without breakin' the ninth commandment, why I don't see where the harm is."

"I s'pose Elmer has told you all the news," Aunt Rinthy suggested, after a wearisome description of an automobile trip strangely devoid of high lights or shadows of adventure. "I s'pose he told you all about the weddin'?"

"No!" exclaimed Colinette, welcoming this diversion as a felon welcomes the close of a "third degree" examination. It had not been easy staving off Aunt Rinthy's probings and Gusta Klatz' more straightforward questions and Helen's sudden shafts of disturbing inquiry, all under the eye of Grandmother Gard, jealously on the look-

out for untruths. "No, he never told me a word about it."

"Ain't Gram'ma Gard?"

"She hasn't had a chance. You see, Neal Brackley came up to call, and then Uncle Luther dropped in—"

At the mention of her wronged brother's name Aunt Rinthy also postponed her description of the wedding.

"Well I guess your Uncle Luther talked turkey to you, didn't he?"

"Not so—not so very much turkey."

"He didn't? Well my land! He's set in my house and jawed hours at a stretch. He's threatened everything that a man could do to punish the whole bunch of you—"

"What for, Aunt Rinthy?" asked Colinette innocently.

"What for? Why, for runnin' off this way and stayin' away all summer! As he said, it wouldn't have been so bad if Gram'ma Gard hadn't been laid up this way. But here she was, hobblin' round and scursely able to drag in her own wood—"

Colinette turned to her grandmother with a heavenly smile. "And did he and Elmer bring in your wood nights after they came home from work?"

"Well now, not that nobody never noticed!"

witnessed grandmother forcefully albeit with little attention to grammatical construction. "I guess I'd a gone pretty pinched for all that Elmer or his father have done for me since you've been away. I hired the Reedy boy to split my wood and the warmin' up and tea-makin' I've done on the oil stove. Oh I've got along all right, but as I told Elmer and Luther, I didn't care to keep boarders under such conditions."

"You say he didn't say a word to you when he was here this mornin'?" demanded Aunt Rinthy.

"Well—he hasn't seen me yet," explained Colinette.

"Oh, that accounts for it, then. He's jawed and jawed. And he and Elmer has just hanted me. Breakfast or dinner or supper, one or t'other of 'em every day and every day. Why, if I could have run across Susan Duniap I'd a drug her home by the hair of her head myself to git rid of them two hungry lummaxes hanging round. And worst of it was I'd never know when to expect 'em. I'd make a small cake in that little tin of mine—you know, gram'ma, that little fluted cake-tin of mine—and then, hurrah boys, here would come Luther or Elmer, or maybe both of 'em, and either me or Helen would have to go without our piece of cake. Because the hired man had to have his piece. It was aw-

ful provoking! I made up my mind to go out on a trip myself and stay till Susan got home—”

“I was thinking of that,” said Colinette softly.

“Well, we started, but a gipsy that was camping up there near that place where you folks left your car told me the awfulest pack of lies about what turrible things was happening here to home that I just made Waldo give up the trip.”

Colinette’s gaze conveyed a sorrowful rebuke.

“You did not attach any weight to the words of a gipsy fortune-teller—not really, Aunt Rinthy?”

“No, I didn’t; but I’d paid her a dollar, and sometimes they do tell awful queer things. You remember that Mis’ Spencer that used to live down by the Milltown Bridge, don’t you gram’ma? Well, a gipsy told her once that she was goin’ to be a widow inside of five years, and then would marry a rich man—”

Mrs. Pickens was off upon one of her pet stories, and before she finished Neal Brackley arrived, and Mrs. Klatz came puffing across the road to embrace the traveler, and to ejaculate, “Vell, vell, you youst see how it comes! Your rheumatism is a goot deal better now you got your girl back aindt it?” And Mrs. Gard, hastily annexing a forgotten cane, replied truthfully that it didn’t seem to be troubling her much any more.

Neal sat and listened politely to Aunt Rinthy's detailed description of the Gertie Calkins' wedding, hoping fervently that Mrs. Pickens would go soon, and that Mrs. Klatz would be moved to draw her call to a close. But these hopes were not to be realized, for Mrs. Gard asked everybody to stay to dinner and everybody accepted the invitation.

Colinette, in a little green house-dress, flew about laying the cloth and bringing in the plates. She was somewhat wan, Neal decided, as if the strain of the last few hours visiting had been too much for her. Or was there, after all, a sorrow to her in the loves of Susan and Willie? There might be. And if there were, no one would ever know. It would be like Colinette to sacrifice her own heart for Susan—

"Seems to me," broke in Aunt Rinthy, her gimlet eyes attempting the secrets so well hidden behind Colinette's sober mask, "seems to me campin' out hasn't agreed with you. You're as thin as a shad. My sakes! If Helen got hollers like them under her cheek-bones I'd be afraid of T B."

Grandmother, who was bringing in a plate of butter, nearly let it slide to the floor while she stopped to gaze with startled intentness at Colinette.

Neal's worst fears were substantiated: Coli-

nette was not happy—not at rest. Why was Colinette not happy? That Pickens woman was right; there were hollows in the girl's cheeks. Good heavens! If only these neighbors—well-meaning of course—would go about their business and give him a chance to find out what was making Colinette unhappy!

In place of dispersing, the company augmented. Waldo Pickens and Luther Dunlap came and immediately after dinner Jeff Plummer put in an appearance, and Neal went away in despair.

"I'll come back this evening," he promised Mrs. Gard

"And mind you do," she warned him, "although I don't s'pose we can count on havin' our talk out, for the probabilities are that the Susans will come steamin' in tonight, and there'll be all kinds of excitement around here."

"Well, sometime—" murmured Neal, bending above grandmother to whisper, "don't let Jeff Plummer carry her off; I want her myself—"

Grandmother looked so conscious and so startled that Aunt Rinthy's curiosity was roused to the breaking point. But as Neal turned to her and shook hands with the same smiling deference and little air of having secrets in common with her also, and when he held Helen's hand so long, and only swept a bow across her shoulder

at Colinette, Aunt Rinthy decided it was just his polite, cityfied way, and went back to her original theory that, for some reason not in any way connected with Neal Brackley, Colinette Gard "was fussed about somethin'," most likely Willie Klatz and Susan Dunlap.

There was no doubt in the mind of anyone present that Jeff Plummer "was fussed about somethin'," nor what and who that something was.

There is safety in numbers, and by reason of the house being full all the afternoon, everybody endeavoring to outstay all the others, Colinette was enabled to steer clear of entangling assertions or confessions. To Jeff Plummer she talked of the superiority of Canfield tires over all other makes when he wanted to talk of heart yearnings; to Aunt Rinthy she spoke always of Gertie Calkins' wedding, even after that lady was sick of Gertie Calkins, her husband, the bridesmaids and the color decorations. She wished to be told the real reason for Colinette's preceding the other members of the auto party in her return home. Uncle Waldo Pickens accused Colinette outright of "puttin' 'em off with foolishness instead of answerin' what they wanted to know." Even Mrs. Klatz considered Colinette unwarrantably secretive in regard to what was keeping her Willie away.

Gusta was the only one who respected Colinette's very evident desire to remain silent as to what had taken place during her summer's vacation. She felt nothing but pity for the harassed Colinette. Gusta had her own theory, and it was that a feud existed between the cousins, the cause of which she believed to be her own dear brother Willie.

"They both want him, and why shouldn't they?" reflected the partial sister. "Such a fine fellow, and so straight and upstanding now since the War. And brave too. Yes, that's the trouble with Colinette's cheeks. He likes Susan best. He always has liked Susan. Poor little Colinette!"

XXIII

ACCORDING to promise, Neal Brackley came to call again in the evening, but so did Jeff Plummer, the Klatz family, the Pickenses and the Dunlaps. The assemblage was given tone, also, by the presence of the doctor's daughter, Lila Merton who, in Colinette's absence, had been Gertie Calkins' bridesmaid. The evening was so full of chatter about the wedding that three of the young men present were moved to wish that Gertie Calkins had never lived to grow up and marry. Elmer Dunlap wanted to continue his probings as to where they had been and how they had managed to elude so many searchers; Jeff Plummer wanted to carry Colinette off somewhere to explain, to implore—to make love as he had never made love before in his life. In case Colinette should declare his suit absolutely hopeless he wished to beat it back to Susan, who wasn't half bad in the way of a match after all; Neal Brackley wanted to finish that very important interview with Colinette and her grandmother.

All three young men were fated to disappointment. At a ridiculously late hour they left the house together and parted coldly upon the walk,

each going his separate way with his separate want unsatisfied.

The next morning Colinette went quite early to the store to "look things over," and it was at the shop door that Neal Brackley picked her up in his car and carried her out on the west road for a breath of air. After a surprisingly short ride they returned and he left her at the shop door again, and drove out of Redmoon at a furious pace towards Brandon, where the car belonged. Before he went he shook hands with Gusta and Helen Pickens and bade them good-by, announcing that he was leaving for good, and that he did not expect to see Redmoon again for many a long day.

Helen followed Gusta into the stock-room and shut the door carefully behind her.

"What do you think of that move?" she asked excitedly.

"Don't astonish me a bit," returned Gusta, "I knew it would happen."

"You knew what would happen?"

"Just what has happened this afternoon, that Neal Brackley would ask Colinette to marry him and that Colinette would refuse."

"Refuse Neal Brackley—whom every or any girl in Redmoon would jump at? You're crazy, Gusta."

"Well, maybe."

“Colinette Gard, with not a cent except what she earns by her work, to refuse Neal Brackley whose father is worth millions, and Neal his only child? You are awfully silly, Gusta.”

“Of course you are at liberty to think so,” replied Gusta haughtily, “but I happen to know a few things.”

“You think Colinette likes Willie Klatz, don’t you?”

“I’m not telling everything I know.”

“Do you think she will marry Willie?”

“I’m not telling everything I know.”

“You’re awful smart, aren’t you, Gusta? But let me ask you this: If there is anything between Colinette and Willie, why did she come back alone from the camping trip and leave Willie and Sus and Aunt Susan still away?”

This happening had been a great problem to Gusta, but it was not her intention to talk over these matters with an unsympathetic person like Helen Pickens. When her brother Willie got home she meant to ask him frankly about many things which Colinette had kept so tantalizingly to herself, and she believed that Willie would tell her.

Meanwhile Grandmother Gard knew nothing of Colinette’s ride with Neal Brackley. Every time a step sounded on the walk, or her front door opened she expected to see the smiling face of the

young man whom she loved next to Colinette herself. And she also watched eagerly for the return of the Susans and Willie Klatz. Their prolonged—their unexplainable absence was now getting upon her nerves almost as seriously as it was upon the nerves of the Dunlaps and Pickenses. She wanted to make her sweet cucumber pickles; she wanted to make cookies and fried-cakes and pies against the return of her daughter. She trembled when she thought of the unpleasantness bound to occur between Susan and her husband upon Susan's return. Anything she could do to mitigate the situation in a culinary way she was eager to accomplish.

But as soon as she measured out flour for pies or friedcakes, a motor car would whiz by and she would hurry to the front window expecting to see it drawn up before the Dunlap door and the welcome figures of the Susans descending from it.

At night Colinette walked up with the other two girls and stood talking with them a moment before she turned to her own door. Her grandmother, watching her from behind the Nottingham curtains of the front window, felt a sudden anger at the girl arise within her.

"If she thinks I'm goin' to bother about her affairs while she takes matters so easy, she'll find she's mistaken," she muttered. "She don't seem

to care to say where she thinks Willie Klatz and the Susans are, and worse, she don't seem to care whether she ever sees Neal Brackley agin or not. Well, I ain't settin' my cap for Neal; it's her job, t'ain't mine, now let her go her gait. I won't mention any of 'em till she does."

And so, although to keep silent on the burning questions haunting her was almost more than she could bear, she adhered to her resolution. Colinette helped with the supper, chucked her grandmother under the chin, told a funny story about Mrs. Brinker buying a hat and insisting on wearing it hind side before, and talked most fluently upon the subject of fancy feathers—whether or not they would be worn at all during the coming season. After the dishes were washed she went away down to the studio to take a look at her picture.

Mrs. Gard felt as if she should burst; as if she could not endure another hour of solitude; another hour of listening for a step which never came, or the purr of an automobile which persistently refused to purr.

"I never could stand it to wait for folks," she grumbled, "I just never could. When John Gard used to go to town I could wait till the hour when he ought to come; after that I just fumed!"

She still wished to hold out against talking to Colinette a while longer, but if Colinette came up

from the studio soon and the two of them passed the evening alone together, she doubted her ability to do so. And so, although she had not been outside of her own yard all summer, she put her knitted shawl about her shoulders and traveled up the road to the Pickenses'.

"Well for the land!" greeted Mrs. Pickens, "way up here and without your cane! Seems to me you got over your rheumatiz about the quickest of anybody I ever see!"

"I'm glad to walk out agin," replied Mrs. Gard, and accepted the chair which Aunt Rinthy brought forth for her.

Mrs. Gard was thankful that Waldo was not at home. He had gone down town to his lodge. Helen was crocheting by the west window.

"Well," began Mrs. Pickens, smiling flatly, "don't it beat the band that they don't show up?"

Mrs. Gard owned freely that it did beat everything.

"Why don't you just pry it out of Colinette why they don't show up?"

"She don't know any more'n we do."

"Oh pshaw! I bet she does."

"No she don't, nuther. She said last night she thought sure they'd be home before bedtime."

"But why—"

Mrs. Gard held up a protesting hand. "Don't ask me why anything happens or why anything

don't happen. I don't know nothin' any more."

"Where's Colinette tonight? Why didn't she come up with you? She ain't put her head inside our door since she come back."

"She ain't had time yet, Rinty. She had to go down to the store that she owns half of to see how things are comin' along there—"

"She isn't at the store now," Helen informed them with a jerk of her shoulders.

"No, she come home to supper, washed the dishes, and then went down to her studio to take a look at her paintin'—"

"She isn't at the studio now," repeated Helen with a provoking, parrot-like monotony of tone.

"If you know where she is so well what are you askin' me for?" demanded Mrs. Gard, at the end of her endurance.

She rose to go. She felt a desire to get home and scold Colinette. Either that, or to drop on her knees by the side of her own peaceful bed and ask the Lord to guide her into ways of sanity and light. She had tried her best to be patient and to do right yet the affairs of her life seemed to be tangling themselves inextricably. She told herself bitterly that she should have known better than to come up here hoping for comfort. "From time everlastin' the Pickenses had ready to rub salt into sore spots."

Helen proceeded to carry this rubbing process

to a climax with a refinement of cruelty hitherto unknown even to the Pickenses.

"No," she said, "she isn't at the store and she isn't at the studio; she's out motoring with Jeff Plummer. I saw them drive by here over half an hour ago."

Aunt Rinthy's smile spanned her face. Her little nose tilted at Mrs. Gard like a spiteful little lance. Her glasses shone with satisfaction. Helen was "gittin' in her work" and Mrs. Pickens gloried in it.

"And that isn't the only young man she has gone riding with today either." Helen made the announcement after a pause long enough to enhance its effectiveness, "she was out this afternoon for just a little while with Mr. Neal Brackley. He stopped for her with his car. He didn't stay out long, though; he didn't have time. He has left town for good. He bade Gusta and me good-by and he said he wasn't coming back to Redmoon for a long time, maybe never."

Mrs. Gard wondered if she dare get upon her feet and attempt locomotion. She felt so frozen that she feared if she moved her bones would creak and break in pieces. For the first time in her life she felt the burden of age, of incompetency, of the reality that her generation had passed, and that the young of her kind merely

tolerated her. Susan and Colinette had both ceased to take her prejudices into account. They swept on with their lives without consulting her. For the first time in all her sturdy years she felt that she wouldn't mind dying.

She possessed no power to hide her feelings from her tormentors, as Colinette would have done. She merely stumbled forth and took the road home with the instinct of the wounded animal for her own lair and solitude.

She did not care—now, when Colinette came in. Why should she care? There she had been expecting Neal and Colinette to come to her to finish out the interrupted interview; had expected Neal to ask Colinette to marry him right before her. What a fool she had been! Had folks done their courting that way when she was young?

But she had imagined that her relation to Colinette and to Neal Brackley had been a little different—a little nearer and more intimate than most old folks with the young of their clan. What a fool she had been! They had taken the first chance to steal away and settle their love affairs out of her sight and hearing.

But why had they done so? she asked herself a dozen times on her way down the hill. And why had Neal gone away without bidding her good-by?

And what was Colinette doing off riding with that Plummer without a word to her? And why, and why?

She had expected Colinette to be at home when she arrived, but she knew the moment she opened the door that the house was empty. That queer irresponsiveness which creeps into a house empty of the one you wish were there, rushed out over the threshold to greet her. Her anger was gone now, but her grief was near to choking her.

She left the front door ajar and went through the house to her own bedroom where she knelt beside her bed. She did not consciously pray, but she was there, at her Master's feet with her burden of age and jealousy and loneliness. Those who should have remembered her had forgotten and ignored her, but God had not.

Presently the floodgates of her soul were opened. She asked forgiveness if she had been too exacting—too arrogant with the child she loved. She asked to be helped to remember that she was old, to remember that younger folk had a right to take their problems into their own hands and settle them their own way.

A great comfort stole over her; a shamed conviction that she had been making a mountain out of a very small hummock in her life road. Angry and hurt because Colinette had gone riding with

Neal Brackley, and afterwards with Jeff Plummer without telling her? Ridiculous!

Yes—but to put her in a position where the Pickenses could hector her—that was cruel! It had been Aunt Rinthy's provoking smile and Helen's triumph over Colinette's neglect of her which had hurt.

But—wasn't it her own pride and selfishness which had been hurt?

"Forgive, dear Lord! Make me a better woman!" she finished, and rose from her knees comforted. If Colinette and Susan had sinned in their treatment of her, who loved them, then that was their problem, not hers; her one care must be to look after her own shortcomings.

She lighted the lamp and looked about for her last number of the Family Record. There was a sermon in that last number which she had started to read and then had put aside to read aloud to Colinette, but the time had not come when they two were alone and in the mood for sermons. Now it might not come at all. She would wait no longer, but read it to herself.

Suddenly there sounded out in front the noises for which she had listened so constantly of late. She dropped her magazine and hurried to the front door. Two cars were at her front walk and people were getting out. She heard her daughter Susan's voice, and young Susan's high,

breezy laughter; she heard the voice of Willie Klatz, and a moment later the commingled shouts of welcome from Willie's mother and sister as they came running across the road. She heard the door of the Dunlap house burst open and the clatter of masculine shoes on the walk told that the scrimmage was about to begin. Mrs. Gard walked down into the midst of what resembled a surprise party.

"Well, Luther, how be you?" inquired his wife, approaching him with her accustomed air, that of the spaniel who has been caught killing chickens.

"Mighty little you care how I be!" rasped out that injured gentleman.

Willie Klatz who had finished greeting his own folks, turned with a peculiar expression to Luther Dunlap.

"We'll go into Mrs. Gard's to talk things over," he announced quite as if his word was law.

XXIV

JEFF PLUMMER, to whom the second machine belonged, did not accept Mrs. Gard's polite invitation to make one of the party. He bade his late passenger good night with a sullen air and wheeled away, not even returning the facetious greetings of Elmer Dunlap, his friend and fellow adventurer.

When Elmer got into the Gard parlor after his unsuccessful effort to have speech with Jeff Plummer, nobody had settled into a chair as yet and the room seemed full. Colinette took Susan by the hand and advanced with her to Mrs. Gard.

"A lady whom you have never met before, grandmother," Colinette announced with shining face, "Mrs. Willie Klatz."

There was a squeal of joy from Willie's sister, a decidedly Teutonic exclamation from Willie's mother, and then for an instant a silence so tense that the clock was distinctly heard ticking, for neither Elmer nor Luther Dunlap had said a word, nor had Mrs. Gard.

"And this,"—Colinette led forth Willie—"is your grand-son-in-law."

Willie broke the spell. In his pride and happiness, he laughed loudly, took Grandmother Gard in his arms and smacked her heartily first on one cheek and then on the other.

"First time I ever had a grandmother," he rejoined. "Well, grandmother, what do you think of my wife?"

He shook hands first with his stepfather-in-law, then with Elmer, then led his bride to his mother and stood by exultantly while the demonstrative embrace took place.

"Oh, Sue," cried Gusta, "can it really be that you are my sister? Oh Sue, I'd rather have you for my sister than anybody else on earth!"

Grandmother stole a glance at Colinette, and what she saw put to rest forever any doubts as to that young person's approval of Sue's marriage. Colinette's face wore the same expression it had when she gazed at that painting of the Pickenses' chicken-house and pronounced it good.

Mrs. Gard thought there ought to be a meal of some sort, but it seemed that everybody had dined except Luther and his son. Remembering this, Luther remembered his grouch, and started in with the task he had determined upon, of making the world disagreeable for his women folk—Good gracious! he had only one poor scrawny little woman folk to lord it over now; young Susan was forever out of his power. He could

neither discipline her nor make her useful as a household drudge. Susan was married, and married without bringing any special honor to him. Not married into the Plummer family, but simply married to Willie Klatz, Waldo Pickens' hired man. He could have throttled that jubilant, victorious young giant. He turned to his wife with a snarl. He would "take it out" on her.

"Well, come along home! High time too. The next time you git away on an all summer's trippin' around while I stay to home an' work I'll bet you'll know it. Now that you are home I want a decent supper!"

"Oh no—oh no," chimed in Willie Klatz, "no supper-getting for Mother Dunlap tonight. We've been kind of humoring her to laziness this summer, and you notice, don't you, how nice and plump she is? No getting supper for her at this time in the evening."

"Because you've married my wife's daughter, you ain't married the hull family," bristled Luther.

"You bet I have!" declared Willie with an uproarious burst of laughter, a burst which somehow swept Luther off his feet. "I've just up and married the whole allotment. Anyhow, you'll be surprised how much I'm going to butt in on family affairs. When I'm unreasonable with my Susan she's going to run away to your house, and when

you are unreasonable to your Susan she's calculating to avail herself of the same privilege at my house. We've framed that all up solid while we were out riding around the country this summer. Isn't that straight, mother?"

"I guess it is," assented Mrs. Dunlap with one enlightening look at her husband.

Then the truth was borne in upon the soul of Luther Dunlap. His power over his wife as well as over her child was broken forever. This son-in-law of Susan's would have a word to say now, and he would not be at all backward about saying it. Why, there was a chance that his wife might leave his house forever and go to live with the young Klatzes. Horrible! And endless procession of breakfasts such as he had been obliged to put up with of late, the awful dinners and worse suppers; dust gathering on everything, his shirts getting to look more and more like the mop, and his buttons always off. And more bitter than all, no one to "take it out on" except Elmer who threatened to "roll his own" if his father didn't mend his ways.

Suddenly Luther turned with an ingratiating smile to his wife who smiled back with such quick forgiveness for sins past and to come that it warmed the cockles of his heart. Luther Dunlap was one who could do things and endure things when he was quite sure that he had to.

"Who wants to walk up with me and break the news to the Pickenses?" challenged Colinette.

"You're too late," said Grandmother Gard, "Elmer's up there by this time."

It was even so, for the entire Pickens family arrived a moment later.

"Well for the land!" cried Aunt Rinthy, pecking at the bride's rosy cheek with thin lips, "I didn't s'pose you'd marry a German, Susan Taylor."

"Oh I'd marry the kaiser if he were as good as Willie," said Susan.

"Well, I don't see what your ma is goin' to do without you."

"She isn't going to have to do without me. Wherever I am my ma is going to be a good deal of the time."

"I guess there is somebody else to have a word to say about that now, ain't there, Willie?"

"What my wife says goes, all the year round," Willie assured Aunt Rinthy.

"They all talk that way when they're first married," put in Helen with a rigid smile. She was well enough satisfied, however, with Susan's marriage. She would not have married Willie Klatz herself. She did not understand how Susan had brought herself to do it, unless it was out of spite toward Jeff Plummer. Of course that was it. She considered Susan foolish to have

been so hasty because, if Jeff did not succeed in getting Colinette, ten to one he would have returned to his old love. But it was too late for that now, and Susan was out of the way of other girls who might stand a show with Jeff.

"Well, Willie, you'd better make up your mind to come back and work for me now," advised Waldo Pickens, "you won't have the face to ask the Plummers for your old job after stealin' a march on Jeff this way. And a married man has to keep a humpin' himself, I tell you; different from having no one but yourself to look out for."

"Ho," said Willie, "I'm not intending to work any more; I'm going to live out of the millinery store. If Sue and Gusty can't work hard enough to support a little fellow like me they ought to be ashamed of themselves."

Somehow the laughter of the company irritated Mrs. Pickens. They were too happy, too well satisfied all around.

"It beats me!" she sighed, "a girl goin' away to get her health—too sick to set up alone, and for all I've ever been told, engaged to one man, and comin' back as healthy as a steer in a corn-field and married to another."

"Just like a story, isn't it?" smiled Colinette. "Sue went away, not really engaged to Jeff Plummer but sort of tangled up with him—Jeff—a man

who will never make any woman happy—and now—”

“And now I s’pose somebody else will try to make Jeff happy; untangle Jeff, so to speak, and soothe his ruffled feelings.”

“Oh Jeff isn’t ruffled any more,” Colinette assured her. “Jeff can see a joke. For instance, he turned in tonight and helped to pry the newly-weds out of a scrape they got into up at Raymond, that little town just the other side of Lake Jane—shall I tell?” She looked at Willie and at Susan and at Mrs. Dunlap, all of whom made believe they did not want the joke told, but showed by their manner that they would not be very much put out if it were.

“Well, after we abandoned our first machine at Lovejoy—”

“Then you had another machine?” Uncle Luther was on the scent of the lost trail now.

Colinette smiled at him but did not answer his question. “After we left the old machine where, it seems, Elmer and Jeff ‘tied it up’ as they called it, we had no more use for it until we needed it to bring us home. But when we took our machine and came away what did the garage man do but send an officer after us (I say ‘us’ because I was still virtually of the party although already at home) and arrest Willie at Raymond. So there

he was, stalled at Raymond, ten miles from home.

"Willie sent a boy down with a message to Jeff Plummer—"

"No, I didn't," interrupted Willie. "That sheriff was going to haul us all back to Lovejoy and that pretty soon. I didn't know whether Jeff would see his way clear to come up and pry us loose or not, but I thought Colinette might be able to persuade him to come, so I sent the note to her, and in less than an hour there she was with the goods. She had Jeff on a leash as docile as a setter dog, and the Lovejoy sheriff went home a disappointed man."

When the party had broken up and the Pickenses had reached their own home, Aunt Rinthy snapped on the light and took off her head wrap. "It's as plain as day which way the cat is goin' to jump," she announced to her assembled family. "She has sent young Brackley off with a flea in his ear, and she's got well rid of Susan—marryin' her cff to our hired man that was—"

Waldo Pickens turned from the dark passage which led to the kitchen where he had just hung up his hat. "Rinthy, are you fool enough to believe that anybody as sharp as John Gard's girl would throw a million over her shoulder for any Plummer that ever lived? You must be crazy!"

Helen twirled her neck. "You can't tell a thing about Colinette Gard," she reminded her

father. "Colinette Gard would not let a million, or two million, even, stand between her and a man she happened to fancy. Colinette is notional, but she isn't mercenary. She would never marry for money."

Down at Mrs. Gard's that lady locked her front door behind her last guest and went into the kitchen to wind the clock. Colinette sat—or rather lay—in the "other rocking-chair," her eyes fixed on nothing in particular, her attitude that of a runner who has earned perfect relaxation and is taking it. Her grandmother came back to the patent rocker and began to untie her shoes. She had resolved to maintain absolute silence toward Colinette, as Colinette had toward her. But silence and repression was not in the Gard nature.

"Well," she demanded, "a penny for your thoughts."

Colinette smiled at her sleepily. "I was wondering," she began softly, "if the snow would really fly off the roof of the Pickenses' chicken-house in a straight line, the way I have painted it, no matter how high the wind might be. What do you think, grandmother?"

The shoe which grandmother had already loosened flew halfway across the parlor in her impatience. She began to whip the laces through the eyelets of the remaining shoe in a manner which bade fair to dislocate every tip.

“What difference does it make whether the snow flies off the Pickenses’ hen-house in a straight line or jumps up and down like a streak o’ lightnin’! Seems funny that you can talk and think of such pifflin’ things when—when—”

“When what, dear?”

“When things are a happenin’ around us! Don’t you care nothin’ about your old gram’ma any more, that you don’t talk things over with her—just set and think about Pickenses’ hen-house and never—”

“What do you mean, grandmother? Here, let me untie that shoe. You are just ruining your laces—”

“Git away! I’ll untie my own shoes! I may be too old an’ out of date to be told young folks’ secrets any more, but I can undress myself yet a spell.”

“What have I done that’s wrong, grandmother? Please tell me.”

“You went off with Jeff Plummer and stayed till after nine o’clock and never told me you was goin’—just let me set here and sizzle till you saw fit to come back.”

“But Willie and Susan were arrested, and instead of roaming home in triumph as I had expected, were to be carried back to Lovejoy and maybe to jail. I had to rush Jeff Plummer right

up to Raymond to 'untie' that old machine that he and Elmer had lied about."

"Don't you know that your goin' off with Jeff that way will make him think you are dead in love with him and want to ketch him? Maybe you do want to ketch him for all I know."

"No, we settled that on the way up to release Willie."

"Settled it?"

"Yes. Jeff asked me to marry him, and I told him gently but firmly, what I thought about him. He was sorry, of course, but, I thought, at the same time rather relieved and made up his mind at once to go back to Susan. From something he said about her after—after I had refused him, I think that was his intention. He begged me never to tell Susan that he had asked me to marry him, and I promised him that I never would, and I sha'n't. You know, grandmother, that I always keep my promises.

"As Aunt Rinthy would express it, I never saw anybody so completely got as Jeff was when Willie presented him to his wife. Jeff had pictured Susan still languishing for love of him and willing to creep to his feet when he saw fit to whistle. Don't you think it served Jeff right, grandmother, and aren't you glad—oh, so glad, that Susan is the wife of a prince like Willie Klatz instead of

a—cruel ignoramus like Jeff Plummer? Dear Susan! who for the first time in her life is to be loved and cherished as she deserves to be loved and cherished?”

Her grandmother ignored this angle of the matter and proceeded with her more serious complaint:

“You went off ridin’ with Neal Brackley and settled up your affair with him without telling me a word about it, or finishing up the talk here to home the way you started out.”

“I didn’t tell you about that because I thought it would make you sad. But I mean to tell you all about it when the time seemed right. Neal called for me at the shop and I went with him—”

“Well—go on.”

“And he asked me to marry him, and I told him—as you and I had agreed beforehand—that I should never marry anybody. And so he went away very sorry, oh, so very sorry—”

“You told him we had agreed to any such thing? Why Colinette Gard, that was a whopper and you know it was a whopper! I never agreed that you wasn’t to marry Neal Brackley! I want you to marry him—”

“But I can’t marry anybody, grandmother, so long as you hold me to that old promise. It wouldn’t be fair to Neal nor to any man. You said that I wouldn’t keep my promise never to

tell; you were afraid the other day when we three sat talking here that I was going to tell. I told you then that I would never tell, and I never shall. And I told you also that, bad as I am, I would never deceive a man who was good enough to marry me, a man whom I loved and who had a right to expect perfect honesty in me."

"You told Neal Brackley that it was your gram'ma's doin's that you wouldn't marry him?"

"No, I simply told Neal that I should never marry anybody; that I meant to devote my life to my profession. And he went away, sorry of course, but—he'll get over being sorry very soon. We need not let that hurt us so very much, grandmother. Men get over these things so quickly—oh, so quickly." Colinette heaved a great sigh and dropped her chin in her hand.

Mrs. Gard sat with her second shoe in her hand in a sort of stony anger. She seemed about to hurl it at her granddaughter.

"And what about you?" she demanded at last in a hollow voice.

The answer was a mere whisper. "Girls suffer a little—longer over such things, but they, too, get over it in time. I shall get over it—in nine or ten years; probably. Meanwhile you and I will be very happy here together. I shall paint pictures—"

"No we won't! I won't have you round! I

won't harbor a girl with a heart as hard as an iron skillet! When a girl has a beau who loves her and that she loves—a boy as nice as Neal Brackley—mind you, I don't say nothin' about Neal's prospects; I don't care a rap for 'em—his pa's money ain't his and probably never will be—but I say, when a young chap as good as Neal wants a girl to marry him, it's her place so to do! To take care of his house and mother his children—”

A crimson tide welled up in the girl's cheeks, suffused her neck and brow and died away almost instantly. “There's the trouble, grandmother; the—possible children. A man—like Neal would be—sort of particular about his childrens' grandparents, wouldn't he? At least a man like Neal would have a right to say whether he would be willing to take the chance—”

Grandmother rose suddenly, swooped for her other shoe, and without a word, stumped away to bed in her stocking feet. Her bedroom door shut to with a bang. Colinette even fancied she heard the key turn on the inside.

She assumed her former position, chin in hand, her attitude one of great dejection. In place of being flushed, her face was pale and the dark hollows showed in her cheeks. Then slowly she straightened up and a smile crept over her mouth,

a smile deepening into silent laughter. She shook her head one, twice, three times, then softly went over to the whatnot, picked up a framed photograph of Mrs. Gard and kissed it fondly.

XXV

THE next morning when Mrs. Gard came out of her room the fire was already blazing in the kitchen stove. Colinette greeted her shyly, conciliatingly.

"Beat you to it this morning," she triumphed. It had long been a game between them, who should awake first and start the kitchen fire.

Mrs. Gard's lips twitched, but she remained silent. She realized that she was being coaxed out of her temper by the tactics of a frolicsome but offending pup. But she was determined not to be wheedled.

After breakfast—a rather constrained meal although Colinette tried hard enough to be gay—Gusta and Susan, the latter gay and rosy and full of happy laughter, dropped in on their way to the shop. They carried Colinette away with them to help with the inventory before Susan and Willie went to the city for the new fall goods.

"My last business trip to the city, so Willie says," boasted Susan.

"I'm going to town today some time, and if I ain't here when you come home to dinner, just open that can of raspberries, and there's cookies

in the jar in the cellarway," Mrs. Gard instructed Colinette. "I may drop in to Sister Kize's, and I may not be home before supper time, if then."

"It will be lonesome to come home and find you away," sighed Colinette. "I sha'n't mind for dinner, but for supper too—"

"I guess you can manage to stand it," replied Mrs. Gard perversely, and Colinette understood that she was not forgiven for what had passed the night before.

Mrs. Gard watched the three girls go down the hill together, then she hastily cluttered the breakfast dishes into the kitchen sink and put on her hat and wrap.

"If I wait to wash the dishes either my Susan or Rinthy Pickens or Mrs. Klatz will be over to spend the day, and I'm in too much of a flutter to fuss with any of 'em," she muttered.

She sat down at Colinette's little desk and wrote something carefully on a sheet of paper, read it critically, tore it up and wrote again. Three times she wrote and three times she destroyed what she wrote. Her last effort she contemplated for a time with a scowl of dissatisfaction.

"Well, it will have to do," she reflected. She tucked it into her bag, locked her door and hurried away, not in the direction of the stores nor Sister Kize's, but straight north, by the Plummer

corner, across Main Street to the one leading to the railway station and telegraph office. She braced herself for an unpleasant ten minutes with Myron Ford, the telegraph operator, and entered the office.

In spite of the pains she had taken with her message, "to make it tell the person she was sendin' it to what she wanted to tell him, and still to keep Myron Ford in the dark," she felt it to be nothing less than a glaring confession of her own and Colinette's innermost sacred thoughts and desires. However, fortune was kind to her. The face of a strange, business-like young operator appeared at the little window, a person who did not even know her by name. She heaved a sigh of relief and handed him her message.

"How long will it take that to git to Florida and an answer to come back?" she asked yearningly.

"If it finds its destination at once, and the person to whom it is sent replies at once, it will take—well, possibly three hours, for messenger service and all."

"Thank you. I'll set right here in the depot and wait," she announced, and the young man went about his business without further comment.

Susan, from the midst of a whirl of ribbon bolts, every one of which must be unrolled and rolled again in the business of inventorying, bent

to whisper to Colinette, "I'm just dying to have a good, long talk with you."

"Come home to lunch with me. You remember, I shall be alone."

Susan accepted the invitation eagerly, and the two left the shop together, carrying a bandbox containing a hat which was to be delivered at a house on Depot Street.

When they reached that quiet street Susan threw an arm about her cousin and kissed her impulsively.

"Why this demonstration?" smiled Colinette, "I'm not Willie."

"Colinette," fluttered Susan, "you're an awful good girl!"

"Of course, I know that."

"I'm not joking."

"Neither am I."

"You have forgiven me, then?"

It was a moment before Colinette could recall her cousin's offense against her. "For stealing Willie away from me?"

"Yes. You know—really—Willie has always loved me. It was just a sort of—of—oh, you know, an infatuation that he felt for you. It wasn't a real, downright, lifelong—oh, it wasn't the real thing, Colinette. Do you understand what I mean?"

"I think I do," said Colinette slowly.

"I'm—I'm just ashamed of myself to be so happy, knowing that—you must be unhappy although of course you don't show it or own up to it."

"Goodness! don't mind me," exclaimed Colinette with great earnestness. "Don't let my state of—well, single blessedness cast the least shadow on your happiness, Sue, dear."

"It does, though," owned Susan, piously. "After all you had done for me it was downright treachery—oh yes it was, and I'm willing to own it. Don't I know how you felt about it? Didn't I go through the same trouble over that horrid old Jeff Plummer? I was jealous of you—I hated you so— Why, Colinette, I could have strangled you! And afterward I found out how mistaken I was; he was in love with you all right, but you weren't in love with him, of course, I know that now. But if I hadn't thought you were to blame in that affair, I don't think I should have ever begun with Willie. At first it was just a sort of flirtation, just to let you see how it felt to have another girl butting in on your love affair, you know. It went on that way for some time—"

"Oh, of course," agreed Colinette, "let's not talk about it, Sue."

"But I must confess a little to you, Colinette," persisted Susan. "I knew you were awfully mad and hurt when you caught a ride with somebody

and ran away from camp, but he has never told me what passed between you two down there at the fence gap which made you run away. He always says, 'oh, let's forget all about that. Colinet's all right. She'll be glad I married you instead of her after a while.' And, of course, I know Willie is right, but—"

"He is right, Sue. I'm glad already. Now isn't it fine and lovely for me to forgive you and Willie so—so entirely? Well then, if you wish to repay me, just do this for me, Sue dear: never mention the matter to me again, nor to Willie, and of course, to no one else in all the wide world, neither your father nor your mother nor—nor to Uncle Waldo Pickens."

"To Uncle Waldo Pic—" Susan turned to stare at Colinette before she burst out laughing.

"Well, you take the blue ribbon. I wish I could get away with troubles as easily as you can. There I just went haywire—crazy, you know—when you carried off my steady; I carry off yours, and in two days you can joke about it. Uncle Waldo Pickens! As if I ever told Uncle Waldo Pickens anything!"

She sobered again, and remarked very seriously, "but you don't feel things as deeply as I do, Colinette; you are more—oh, sort of frivolous. Now that isn't exactly what I mean either. But you don't love as hard as I do."

"That's it, Sue. I have the artistic temperament, and the artistic temperament is invariably light—frothy—we artistically temperamental folk flit from flower to flower, so to speak—"

Susan gave her cousin a rapturous look—an admiring look. "But I do hope you will come across some good man whom you can stick to and marry and be happy. It's just wonderful to be married."

"Yes, Sue, but marriage isn't for everybody, you understand, and I shall be happy with just grandmother to love and take care of."

"That will be pretty dull work," owned Susan commiseratingly. "Not but that gam'ma is a dear soul—"

Colinette had grasped Susan's arm convulsively. They were passing the railway station, and within, Colinette had caught sight of the top of a dearly beloved head, where grandmother patiently awaited the answer to her message.

Colinette hastily directed her cousin's attention away from the station windows to a woman passing on the other side of the street.

"Look," she whispered, "but don't say a word until we are well past."

"What is it?" demanded Susan, staring.

"A hat which wasn't bought at our store."

"How do you know it wasn't?"

"Do you think Gusta would let anything so horrible go out?"

Susan laughed, and turned to gaze after the stranger, remarking that Colinette needn't feel jealous as that woman did not belong in Redmoon and had a right to buy hats in some other town. And thus the station was safely passed and Susan had not seen.

After this Colinette became almost hysterically gay. Susan could not understand her. Such a mood was unusual with her.

Before they were through with their simple midday meal Mrs. Gard arrived. She too seemed in a hilarious frame of mind.

"You didn't go to Mrs. Kize's, then?" questioned Colinette.

"Nope."

"Oh, you have been doing some extravagant buying. I know, Susan, what she has in her bag; *the* wedding present."

"When I buy Susan's weddin' present it ain't going to be anything I can carry home in my bag. When Susan finds out where she's going to live I'm going to git her her kitchen stove. A young housekeeper always gits fooled buyin' her kitchen stove."

Five days later Colinette, alone in the studio (where Jeff Plummer troubled her no more) experimented in making the snow fly off the Pick-

enses' hen-house roof in every way except that suggested by her grandmother, "up and down like a streak of lightnin'." Drifting snow though erratic is not quite so erratic as that. A sharp rap on her door interrupted her. She rose to admit her caller, rather fearing a return of Jeff Plummer.

It was not Jeff Plummer, but her grandmother who confronted her. Mrs. Gard was dressed in her Sunday best. She evidently expected Colinette to be a good deal startled.

But Colinette was not startled. Grandmother Gard would have been the startled one could she have read the thought in the girl's mind, "I'm glad she has put on her best dress; I wanted her to look her sweetest."

She would not come in. She was plainly excited. "I want you to take a walk with me," she announced.

"How nice," said Colinette, and made haste to put away her brushes.

They paced along the length of Brown Street, turned on to Jefferson, crossed the railroad, passed the windmill factory and the Methodist church. At the long deserted Brackley mansion they turned in and went slowly up the front walk between borders of aster, michaelmas daisy and dwarf goldenrod to the pillared porch. Here Neal Brackley came out to meet them. He was

expecting Mrs. Gard, and she was not at all surprised at his appearance. The queer part of it was that the one who should have been too much surprised for words, seemed not to be surprised at all. It was like a scene upon the silver screen, full of meaning, but wordless.

Grandmother Gard settled into the easychair which Neal drew out for her, a little awestruck and embarrassed by the grandeur about her; the grand piano, the shadowy paintings, the Eastern rugs, as Colinette had once described them, glinting like precious stones where the light from the curtained windows struck across them.

Mrs. Gard cleared her throat and began in a solemn voice:

"I thought best to have this talk here where there wa'n't any chance of the Pickenses or Dunlaps bustin' in, so," she turned to Colinette, "I asked Neal to meet us here."

Colinette was pale. She sat with her eyes downcast, the hollows under her cheekbones painfully evident in the dull light of the curtained room.

"Colinette says you asked her to marry you, and she refused."

"That is the painful truth, grandmother," acknowledged Neal.

"Did she say she wouldn't have you because she liked somebody else better?"

"Yes."

This answer startled Mrs. Gard; she had not expected it.

"Who?" she questioned faintly.

"You," answered Neal, and the tension in Mrs. Gard's attitude relaxed visibly.

"That's a whopper! She likes you best of anybody, but she wouldn't have you because I wouldn't let her break a promise made to me a good while ago and tell a secret that we decided was best kept to ourselves. Nobody but us two knows it, and there was no use anybody else ever to know it this side the grave. But she wouldn't have it that way. She wouldn't tell, but she has forced me to—"

Colinette made a convulsive movement to take her grandmother's hand, but that lady kept herself free and went on:

"The secret is, that Colinette ain't my kin; that none of my blood flows in her veins. She is—"

"An impostor," breathed Colinette, and for the first time raised her eyes to Neal's face.

He came and raised her out of the chair and held her in a compelling embrace. "Who cares?" he challenged. "She may be the Queen of Sheba or the king's beggar maid, she is mine now and forever."

"Wait," commanded Grandmother Gard, "till you hear the hull story before you settle things."

Colinette made an effort to free herself from his embrace but he would not have it.

“Why say another word about it?” he demanded. “You wanted it kept secret, grandmother, then why not keep it so? Only one thing matters to me, and that is that I have my girl again. You picked her up in the past and cherished her—”

“No, Neal, I picked grandmother up,” confessed Colinette.

“And cherished me,” added grandmother, with a slight tremble in her voice, “and cherished me.”

“I chose my relatives to suit myself,” said Colinette. “My own were swept away to oblivion in a railway wreck. I had no name; I was just Number 154 in an orphan asylum. I chose my own name—Colinette. I thought it pretty and—romantic. Do you?”

He still held her close. He looked down upon her smiling, and all that he said was, “Colinette! Little Colinette!”

“Then you still want her after learning the horrible truth that she ain’t got any of the slow, blunderin’ Gard blood in her veins? If you do, although you ain’t asked it, I give my consent to your weddin’.”

“I didn’t ask for it, because I took it for granted the moment I got your message. The lovely part

of this affair is that my folks are as anxious for this marriage—almost—as I am. I wasn't at home the day your telegram arrived. It was father who sent you the answer. My dear old dad knows a thing or two, grandmother."

It was dusk, and a slip of a moon stole out into the evening as the trio walked back together to the little gray house on the hill. As they talked over many things; Neal's plan to revive his grandfather's old manufacturing activities in Redmoon; "to open the old plant and make things to sell, things that folks need and that they will be glad to buy," he explained. He would put Willie Klatz at the head of the concern and eventually take him in as partner.

His mother fancied that she was healthier in the South, consequently his own people would never live in Redmoon again. But Colinette loved Redmoon. The three of them would make Redmoon their headquarters, living together in the old Brackley place.

Mrs. Gard vetoed this scheme so far as she was concerned. They had arrived at her door, and she bent with a little affectionate flourish and put the key in the lock.

"This little house fits me better," she said, "and as long as I am hearty and healthy I shall stay right in it."

Colinette went in to light the supper fire, and

Grandmother Gard laid a detaining hand on Neal's arm.

"I want to warn you," she said, "you're biting off a big mouthful when you take her for better or for worse. She's got a will like a copper kettle; it can be bent, but not busted. If she takes it into her head a thing ought to be so, if she can't do it herself she'll fool other folks into doin' it.

"Take Susan and her love affairs: You'd think a girl had a right to pick out the man she wants to marry, wouldn't you? Well, Susan wa'n't allowed to pick out her own husband. No sir, Colinette picked him out. Wonderful part of it is, Susan don't know it and never will, because Colinette and I ain't talkin' about it to nobody but you."

"Colinette has never intimated it to me," laughed Neal.

"She sent you off with the mitten because I wouldn't give in and let her tell you that she didn't rightfully belong to me. You see I thought she did when she first come here to me. She passed herself off as my son John's girl. When she turned out so smart and so pretty, I thought that John, as her father, and me as her grandmother, must have had more in us than folks give us credit for havin' and I was just all puffed up with pride.

"Then, for certain reasons, she thought the

truth ought to be told, and so she told me, and I tell you, my pride took a fall. I might a known that no Gard could be as smart as that girl was. She didn't have a Gard trait—not one; we was all black and slow and heavy; she was red and little and quick as lightnin'; us Gards always blurted out everything an' then give up easy; she was still and deep and worked things out to suit herself.

“But she can't always manage me. It wasn't her doings my sendin' for you—”

Neal broke into such sudden boyish laughter that Mrs. Gard eyed him suspiciously.

“Unless she knew me well enough to be sure that I would do just what I did do—send for you. Unless she planned so that I would be driv to do the tellin' myself. Do you think she done that?”

He still kept up his laughing, but he put his arm around grandmother Gard and chucked her under the chin. “What difference does it make? I am here, and Colinette has given her promise, and Colinette never breaks a promise. What difference does it make, grandmother?”

“Well, it shows you what you're comin' to, don't it? She'll have her way by hook or crook, and you can be thankful that it's generally a good way.”

“And as for the secret,” promised Neal, suddenly very serious, “it shall never be breathed

by any of us. I will not even tell my own dear father, which is putting it strong, for we are chums and I always tell him about everything."

He stooped and kissed grandmother reverently. Luther Dunlap, who had come out to look at the thermometer, saw the kiss and rushed back into the house to announce his suspicions to his wife.

THE END

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